
Stassen’s impressive work which he devoted to a very small group of people whose lives and endeavours spanned a relatively short period of time, (fifty years), is testimony to the author’s ability to track down and utilize a wide variety of sources. The scope of the enterprise in writing this book becomes evident if one considers the following: there are 142 pages of endnotes, 16 pages listing archival sources and twenty pages of secondary sources. The sources include unpublished archival documents, both Portuguese and South African, marriage registers of the Reformed Churches in South Africa, South West Africa and Angola, reports to the state secretary of the ZAR, manuscripts, handwritten diaries, oral testimony, government publications, interviews and correspondence. Stassen also obtained information from magazines and newspapers (11 pages), periodical publications, post cards, and lastly, impressions derived from personal visits. Reminiscent of the work of Fernand Braudel, whom he listed as a source, the study is infused with a longue durée approach in which the physical environment forms the backdrop against which the central theme unfolds.1 In the absence of a single structuring narrative through which the lives of Angola Boers could be tied together over a period of hundred years, the text aims to emphasize the interplay of human agency and environmental determinism.

This study is undoubtedly superior in several respects to earlier studies of the Angola Boers, with the partial exception of the work of Hans Heese.2 It is, first of all, the product of more intensive scholarship, in both depth and breadth, utilizing a greater variety of sources. Secondly, it eschews the obligatory overtly respectful attitude towards the subjects of investigation of earlier studies. The third characteristic pertains to an attempt to approach its subject matter in total history fashion, combining political background, environmental, socio-cultural, economic and religious features. The study is also situated against the backdrop of the environmental, climatic and geological history of present-day Angola and within the broader history of Portugal in its interaction with Africa. The one drawback of the book is that this first section, which provides the background to the main theme, the lives of the Angola Boers, is arguably too short (23 pages) to convey a sense of understanding of Portugal’s more than five hundred years of involvement in Africa. It is also too episodic and lacks a consistent theme running through it to unite the disparate elements such as the relationship between the African peoples of Angola and the settler Portuguese, the long history of neglect of the territory by Portugal, the extent to which the policy of assimilation has succeeded and how much of a

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distinction can be drawn between the
concepts of race and culture in Portu-

guese society. Nevertheless, it does
manage to convey an image of a
country where colonial policy was
haphazardly applied with a decided lack
of direction, focus and administrative
rigour, such as could for example be
found in British and French African
colonies.

Another drawback is the decision to
omit the period before 1928, although
Stassen does touch on certain aspects,
such as providing a brief description of
the various treks from 1873 to 1928
and the reasons for both the trek to
Angola as well as the decision to return
to SWA in 1928. The nature of the
sources at his disposal makes this
omission of detailed coverage of the
period before 1928 less of weakness
than it might otherwise have been. Even
as enterprising a researcher as Stassen
had proved himself to be, was unable to
construct a narrative that could tie
together the hopes, lives and experi-

cences of a widely disparate group of
people. The reasons for this is manifold,
including the scattered nature of their
settlement, with people settling into
what amounted to little more than
pockets of kin networks. As such, joint
initiatives from Angola Afrikaners were
virtually non-existent, from which a
reliably coherent narrative history could
have been constructed. Although
Stassen provides a useful amount of
information about their social, cultural
and religious lives and their interactions
with Portuguese and Africans, the result
is little more than scattered impressions
evolving in uneven fashion over roughly
half a century. In the absence of a
strong chronology sustained by ana-
lytical clarity and coherence, Stassen’s
work resembles the many excellent
photographs included in the volume:

3 Stassen conceded that he had to make a
decision on whether he should have included the
history of the Angola Boers before 1928, but
decided against it because it had been the focus
of numerous studies published over more than
half a century. He did mention that he intended
to return to this period in a subsequent study.
(personal communication, June 2011).

snapshots of significant suggestive
power, rather than a more sustained

narrative of the lives of the Angola-

Afrikaners. This choice has been largely
dictated by the source material and the
author cannot be faulted for it. It is
therefore a pity, and not of Stassen’s
making, that a more detailed, per-

sonalised account of individuals and

communities, or at least extended
families, did not emerge. The absence
of obvious sources conducive to such
an undertaking, for example a culture of
letter writing and the paucity and
religiously-inspired sobriety and piety of
church documents, minutes of church
meetings in particular, would have
rendered any attempt at reconstruction
virtually impossible. He was able to talk
to a number of surviving former re-

sidents from Angola, yet it appears that
at best impressionistic evidence of
conditions and information about the
names of relatives and, occasionally,

major events could be obtained.

The structure of the book, which is
divided into five parts and covered in
seventeen chapters, appears to repre-

sent a deliberate choice to engage with
the subject matter in thematic, rather
than chronological fashion. Although
this militates against providing a coherent overarching narrative, it allows the author the scope required to deal with a rich diversity of data and a variety of topics. In chapter one of the first part the topic is the physical environment: geomorphology, riverine systems, geology, soil types, climate, vegetation and animal life. Part two, chapter two, deals with the history of Angola up to 1975, chapter three focuses on the composition of the Angolan population and chapter four on the economy. Part three covers the treks of the Angola Boers between 1880 and 1928 (chapter 5), chapter six deals with the history of the people between 1928 and 1958, chapter seven with economic conditions, chapters eight and nine with material culture, chapter ten with education, chapter eleven with religion, chapter twelve focuses on relations with other population groups and chapter thirteen on social conditions. Part four contains a single chapter (14) and is concerned with the repatriation of Angola Boers in 1958. Part five covers the history of the people up to 1975 (chapter 15), the flight from Angola in 1975 (chapter 16) and the final chapter provides an assessment of the significance of almost hundred years of Boer settlement in Angola.

Stassen addresses several issues that help to throw light on these settlers and which go well beyond earlier accounts that mostly focused on attempts to cater for their religious needs. These were largely restricted to irregular visits by ministers from SA or SWA, and were aimed at administering religious rituals and sacraments and some religious instruction. It is the analysis of economic conditions in particular that provides significant information. For people whose objective had been to start a new life, the high hopes invested in moving to Angola rarely materialised. Most lost the majority of their stock (cattle, horses, goats) and never quite managed to rebuild their herds. Various reasons are advanced for this: lack of security of tenure and capital, little assistance from the Portuguese authorities and the underdeveloped nature of the country until the 1960s. Contemporary assessments of these Afrikaners were often quite negative, stressing aspects such as the lack of endeavour, an inability to engage in sustained hard work and a partiality to hunting as a way of life. To a certain extent they also suffered the white man’s ‘disease’, that of considering manual labour beneath their dignity, irrespective of their degree of poverty. Stassen is always careful however, to counter-balance negative perceptions with accounts of the good qualities that people observed in them, such as a degree of social cohesion, adherence to their religion, respect for authority and the law and an enduring attachment to their language, Afrikaans.

Elaborating on what Portuguese and South African visitors often observed to be a lack of motivation to improve themselves evident amongst many Angola Boers, Stassen provides a wealth of information to account for the apparent laziness and a propensity for hunting to the detriment of artisanal work and crop cultivation. Conditions often conspired against these people, he argues, but there is also evidence that a lack of education, experience and exposure to stimulating societal examples featured
significantly as reasons for the lack of enterprise displayed. Particularly valuable is his provision of context. Various aspects of the lives of Angola Afrikaners are compared to those of Afrikaners living in poverty in South Africa, esp. at the time of the Carnegie Commission’s investigation into the conditions of poor whites in the 1930s. Contrary to the view that people were impoverished as a result of being forced off the land and that they should return to it, Stassen argues that the Angola Boers did not have the option of exchanging rural for urban life. They were more or less stuck in an unpromising environment with little prospect of improvement. Lack of educational advancement, few prospects of improving their lives by being forced to move to towns to compete for work and acquire skills and no access to electoral means to advance their claims for improvement, are further factors that militated against improving conditions.

Although an exposure to the rugged life of pastoral nomads over many generations and a proclivity for a hunting lifestyle do not necessarily carry sufficient explanatory force to account for a lack of material advancement, they do suggest the extent to which this way of life proved to be an enduring feature of the lives of Angola Boers, who represented the last wave of white pastoral nomadism in southern Africa.

Stassen situates the Angola Boers in the context of a lifestyle devoted to pastoral nomadism and extensive farming that had endured for more than two hundred years. His candid approach to the people is evident from the way in which he explicitly compares the lives of Angola Boers with Africans who traditionally employed a similar lifestyle, one which involved constant movement to new lands as the older ones became exhausted. Although the Boers continued to move around from one area to another, this way of life was taking place under increasingly inauspicious conditions, especially in the period after 1928, when improved roads and means of transportation in Angola began to undermine a primary means of survival, transporting goods by ox wagon. That their isolation had largely deprived these people of educational advancement is evident and was consistently one of the issues that they themselves, as well as visitors from SA and SWA mentioned. External and self-imposed constraints ensured that very few were upwardly mobile in career or economic trajectory. Stassen points to additional impediments that conspired to keep them poor and culturally-isolated, such as the failure to obtain legal title to land, transport difficulties, lack of educational opportunities, and their propensity to remain in isolated groups. The lack of educational opportunities, including technical training, prevented them from obtaining employment in the Portuguese administration, military and in private enterprises.

Stassen takes a refreshingly candid approach in his description of the Angola Boers, often warts and all, but in general the picture that emerges is fair. Photographs from the book tend to confirm the written evidence, revealing an often impoverished people striving to maintain their dignity. Apart from shaping their way of life, their conservatism was deeply rooted in their religion. They were mostly members of the Reformed
Church (Hervormde Kerk), most having moved from the Reformed Church (Gereformeerde Kerk) because they objected to mission work among black people in Angola. Like so many Boers, or Afrikaners in South Africa during the late 18th and 19th century, they eschewed social contact with black and brown communities, arguing that to associate with these people would signify degeneration, a theme familiar to all whites at the time. Anybody who ventured beyond the constraints of societally-imposed boundaries faced being ostracized. While their aloofness from neighbours, Portuguese and black Africans alike, may have served the purpose of maintaining a degree of ethnic cohesion, it has, Stassen observes, caused them to be viewed with suspicion by both groups. The Portuguese authorities were sceptical about the motives of these Boers, fearing that they might prove to be a Trojan horse for imperially-minded European neighbours. Isolation did not serve them well – they often complained about a lack of assistance from the Portuguese authorities, with the latter often in doubt about the Boers' loyalty to the administration. When civil war broke out in 1975, numerous cases of attacks, including rape of women, were reported as Boers started fleeing towards the border with South West Africa. Angola Boers who were brought to South Africa in 1958 encountered negative public perceptions of their alleged backwardness. One person mentioned that he was constantly harassed at work and accused of taking the bread of out people's mouths, which is eerily reminiscent of attitudes to foreigners in contemporary SA. Officially though, attitudes appeared to be less judgmental. An official of the Department of Home Affairs depicted them in more favourable terms, stating that though they were poor and lacked skills, they were not totally illiterate and were willing to work to improve their condition. They also did not appear to be lacking in social graces. What is evident from the book is the extent to which the Angola Boers were members of an unsettled community, constantly planning to move, if not back to SWA, then to other locales in Angola itself and occasionally further afield. It would certainly make for a fascinating study if their migrations could be contextualized by inserting them into regional histories of migration: migrant workers trekking to the gold mines of South Africa, persons displaced by civil war and South Africa's war against neighbouring countries, and finally, the exile experiences of people who fled colonial rule and discrimination. Investigating the history of people who suffered physical dislocation and were later resettled into old, or new communities, might offer significant new perspectives on the southern African region for at least the last hundred and fifty years. What finally makes Stassen's work fascinating, is not only his refusal to fall into the trap of depicting the Angola Boers in heroic terms, battling adversity, hostile black groups and suspicious Portuguese authorities, but his willingness to draw larger conclusions from the lives and experiences of this relatively small group of people. They represented a last generation of Boers or Afrikaners who trekked
throughout southern Africa for more than two hundred years, while still managing to retain important characteristics of their 18th and 19th century forebears’ way of life. The question of the so-called trek spirit as a reason for their constant movement, into and from Angola, as well as inside Angola itself, is linked to the old tradition of pastoral nomadism characteristic of Boers in South Africa. Visser, in his review of the book, correctly argues that though Stassen refuses to see this trek spirit as a formative influence and an attempt to escape from civilized society, it certainly merits attention, because many of these people referred to their wandering traits, and observers have often mentioned that the Angola Boers were either idle, or engaged in hunting, their prime pursuit. Across Southern Africa, Boers were associated with hunting and the extermination of wildlife and in SWA, at least until 1950, German-speakers often viewed them in a negative light. It was especially their lack of culture and a propensity to be constantly on the move and to eschew hard work, which elicited adverse comments.

Stassen does, in passing mention that most of the Angola Boers that returned in 1928 and again in 1958, managed to readjust to ‘civilised’ life in SWA and SA quite well, but little evidence is advanced to sustain this claim, apart from opinions expressed by contemporary observers. In the 1930s, drought and recession rendered the position of Angola Boers in SWA extremely precarious and a degree of dissatisfaction was evident in the white community because of what was perceived to have been money wasted on resettling the people from Angola. The SWA Commission of 1935 pertinently addressed this issue and allegations of corruption associated with the sale of inferior cattle to Angola Boers. A senior administration official expressed the view that though these people were struggling to cope with adverse conditions, he predicted that at least 60 per cent of them would eventually make a success of farming. No evidence exists to suggest that he was wrong. It is to Stassen’s credit that he is able to bring to life the history of people who hardly featured in the general history accounts of southern Africa, and Afrikaners in particular. The history of the Angola Boers is depicted and described vividly, despite the serious challenges posed by sources full of data yet often not amenable to analysis and evaluation. Stassen’s own career aptly reflects his colourful subject matter. He started off as an engineer (M.A.), before proceeding to become a managing editor and owner of a book publishing company. This book, which was originally presented as a PhD in


History, has now also been published in English to assure a wider readership.\textsuperscript{6} As a final observation, the story of the Angola Boers does reflect the tenor of changing times and historical perspectives. Investigating the history of marginalized peoples, especially if adequately contextualized to highlight the causes and consequences of marginalization, can thrust forward fascinating historical perspectives and assist in recapturing the lives of so many groups who barely feature in existing history text books of southern Africa.

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