

THE UNPREDICTABLE PAST A REVIEW OF IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE: ANGOLA'S FORGOTTEN MASSACRE.

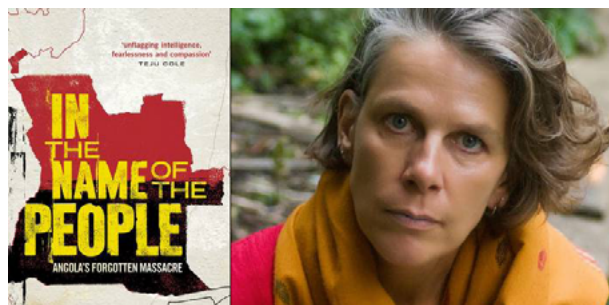
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Claudia Gastrow reviews Lara Pawson's In the Name of the People: Angola's Forgotten Massacre.

Lara Pawson's riveting book sets out to better understand the events surrounding the 27 May 1977, a date that was formative for post-independence Angola, but whose events and repercussions are little known outside of the country itself. On that day, an internal struggle within the ruling MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) burst into the public sphere during an attempted uprising led by the charismatic Nito Alves, much loved in Luanda's *musseques*, against Agostinho Neto's ruling establishment, backed by the Cubans. Alves and his supporters were subsequently eliminated, followed by years of purges of suspected "factionalists". No one knows how many people disappeared. The violence of the reprisals produced a political situation of fear where dissent was hardly ever expressed. Parents warned children, and friends reminded each other that open criticisms of the MPLA would lead to a fate similar to Alves's. The result was that between 27 May 1977 and 7 March 2011, there were almost no public displays of organised dissent inside MPLA controlled Angola.

Despite the importance of the event for understanding Angolan political life, until recently it was only mentioned in whispers. Pawson takes on



Source: *The Daily Maverick*.

the challenge of bringing the whispers into focus, unpicking the weight of shared memories and nervous glances. Through interviews with those present on the day, research into scholarly records and newspaper accounts, as well as contemporary fieldwork in Luanda, the book takes us through Pawson's attempt to figure out what actually happened on the *vinte e sete* (twenty-seventh). Pawson in many ways comes to a conclusion that contradicts her initial interest in the topic, which stemmed from her belief that it was "a well-kept secret" (5). Instead, through her interlocutors' fears and frustrations, she discovers that the 27 May haunts the country, providing a window into the contemporary workings of power in Angola.

For those less familiar with Angola's history, the 27 May 1977 is considered a moment of rupture. It marks the end of the jubilation of early independence, and the day when the possibility of a popular socialist state was decisively foreclosed. However, as Pawson's account highlights, what actually happened on that day is strongly disputed. The day emerged from longstanding fractures within the MPLA about its post-independence political direction. One group, led by Nito Alves, pushed for a more explicitly Marxist government. They vocally criticised the

existing Neto regime for creeping corruption and the marginalisation of the majority black poor from positions of political and economic power. For them, substantial change was not coming fast enough. Those surrounding Neto contended that the *nitistas*, those associated with Nito Alves, sought to undermine the fragile stability of a country already in conflict, and accused Alves of crude racial nationalism rather than a genuine bid for change. On the 27 May conflict broke out in the early hours of the morning as *nitistas* stormed one of the city's prisons and took over the national radio station. However, by the evening, the Neto regime, backed by Cuban forces, had managed to recapture the radio and brought the city back under its control.

Violent reprisals ensued against those accused of being Alves supporters, with people believing that those killed reach into the thousands. A politics of fear that ravaged especially, but not only, those living in Luanda arose. Parents turned over sons and daughters to the police to protect their other children, spouses disappeared, and people fled the country to escape persecution and torture. The damages penetrated deep, for, as one of Pawson's interlocutors reminds her, "there is not an Angolan family that escaped the twenty-seventh of May" (65). It is the commonly shared moment of pain which no one spoke about for many years due to fear of invoking the institutions of reprisal that have attached themselves to it.

In trying to understand what took place and how such a sentiment of fear was created in relation to the mere discussion of the event, Pawson takes her readers from chilly London, to post-colonial Portugal, and finally to Luanda at the moment of its post-conflict construction boom as she searches for

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people willing to speak to her. In doing this she does not construct a historical narrative. Rather, usually describing her discoveries in the first person, she works through various accounts of the day as she becomes progressively entangled in the doubts and ambiguities of the *vinte e sete*. Everything about the day appears fuzzy. Some claim it was a popular uprising, others a coup which lacked significant support. There is little agreement about who gave the orders to kill, and no one will take responsibility. The Angolan state, and sympathetic foreign journalists and academics at the time, appear to have doctored the official accounts. As one example of the haze of historical memories, Pawson interviews two people, Michael Wolfers, a leftist British journalist who worked at the national radio and Ana Nunes, an Angolan woman in exile whose husband was killed in the purges following the 27 May. Both of them were present at the National Radio on the day, but, having significantly different political allegiances, present strongly contrasting accounts of what happened and what the intent of the demonstrators was. This is the situation of the 27th of May, a foundational event whose basic outlines it has become seemingly impossible to establish an account of.

Although the events of the day cannot be decisively captured, the emotional, social, and

political damages of the *vinte e sete* are palpable. Pawson listens to the painful stories of Maria Reis who has lived in exile since her husband, an apolitical bank manager, was killed on the day. Pawson’s friend, João van Dúnem, the brother of one of the executed *nitista* leaders, recounts his experience of being recalled from military training in Cuba only to be put directly into prison for two years where he lost hearing in one ear due to torture. She also investigates the official MPLA version of what took place. Interspersed with the stories of damaged lives and bodies, are the accounts of the supporters of Neto, among them the then director of the state newspaper, Ndunduma Wé Lépi, considered responsible by many for inciting violence against the *nitistas*. Included in the construction of the official version of events are the curt and obstructionist reactions of foreign journalists and academics. Caught up in the politics of the early days of independence, Pawson implies that they let significant abuses and killings pass under their radars due to political allegiances and ideologies. In doing this, she argues that they collaborated in producing the silence and confusion that surround the *vinte e sete*.

As Pawson works through her interlocutors’ tales, she gets no closer to a definitive account of what took place. What she does encounter are people’s fears, revealing the apparatus of repression and surveillance that even those who have fled Angola believe themselves to be subject to. People are scared of being overheard, believe that mechanical dragonflies are spying on them, and fear that Angolan state informants are present even in London and Lisbon. This exposes the extent to which many people have internalised the explicitly coercive

violence of the 27 May into a practice of self-control that they fear to break in case such an action might summon forth unexpected violence. At times this threat becomes palpable, such as when Pawson herself receives mysterious phone calls warning her that people are aware of what she is doing in Angola. But what becomes very clear is that the reason for repression is also the state’s fear of the 27 May.

Pawson’s account of the afterlives of the 27 May is one of the book’s most important contributions. Through describing not only people’s memories, but also their understanding of those memories in relation to subsequent events and their present condition, Pawson provides a detailed study of the workings of political power in Angola and the still existing streams of dissent that have been the reason for the MPLA’s avoidance of the topic. The grievances of the *nitistas* have never really been fully addressed; they simmer and grow in the inequality of Luanda’s oil boom, in the unfulfilled promises of socialism, capitalism, and now democracy. No one wants to be identified as responsible for the deaths of thousands of individuals, especially when the grievances of those individuals are still held by many to be perfectly legitimate. This has become evident in the years since Pawson researched the book. In the wake of the Arab Spring a protest movement made up of primarily young urban Angolans has taken to the streets in the first ongoing displays of public dissidence since 1977. Along with other organisations they have begun to actively demand that the current MPLA government begin to openly discuss the 27 May. In this sense, although Pawson’s book is about a past event, it is very much about contemporary Angola. Grievances that were presumed buried have

surged back into the post-conflict public sphere and once again the MPLA is uncertain what to do.

Pawson's book is a classic for those interested in contemporary Angola. It acts as an avenue for making public the voices of the victims of the 27 May and provides a comprehensive account of the various versions of the day, enabling the reader to grasp the tensions undergirding Angolan independence and the country's present politics. This in itself is an important contribution to the literature. It is also a challenging book for researchers as she elegantly shows the perils of anyone assuming that they are on the side of the righteous.

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The seeming constant refusal to engage the event by journalists and academics who were close to the MPLA, perhaps charmed by the promises of a socialist future, led to the elision of the suffering of others. Finally, in exposing the web of confusion that has purposely been created around the event – from the doctoring of official accounts to the threats to dissidents' lives – Pawson shows how political power, the threat of violence, and historical memory are intertwined in the making of political hegemony. Christine Messiant once wrote, “In Angola, even the past is unpredictable”; Pawson's research does not dispel that unpredictability, what she does do, however, is expose how and why it is that the past has been rendered unpredictable. In doing this, Pawson elegantly captures the political threat and the political promise of the *vinte e sete*.