
“A Native Knows A Native”: African American Missionaries' Writings about Angola, 1919-1940¹

Modupe Labode, Iowa State University

©2000 Modupe Labode. Any archiving, redistribution, or republication of this text in any medium requires the consent of the author.

In 1930, the Galangue mission choir, under the leadership of Bessie McDowell, introduced a new song at the celebration commemorating fifty years of Congregational missions in Angola. In addition to singing the oratorio "Esther, the Beautiful Queen" at the Jubilee, the choir sang Bessie McDowell's Ovimbundu translation of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing." This song was dear to the African American missionaries who ran the Galangue mission. African Americans called "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," composed in 1900 by the brothers James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson, the "Negro National Anthem." Reverend Henry Curtis McDowell, Bessie's husband, wrote to African American supporters of the mission in the United States and informed them that "Galangue has made the first step, so far as I know, in making it [Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing] the international anthem."² The McDowells considered this anthem appropriate for the Ovimbundu Christians because they considered the Ovimbundu to be part of the worldwide family of Negroes.

Black Congregationalists founded, funded, and operated the Galangue mission and it existed as an African American enterprise from 1922-1940. The Galangue station was a black-run station in a predominately white church, and this form of organization made it unique among Protestant missions in Africa in which African Americans participated. Most other such stations were either operated by African American denominations or were run by predominately white churches, with black missionaries working alongside white missionaries.

The African American missionaries who worked at Galangue informed their supporters about the

activities of the mission, Angola, and the Ovimbundu through letters, circulars, and articles. Missionaries used this correspondence to meditate on important aspects of their identity and experience: race, culture, and the nature of their connection to Africa. This correspondence is significant for the light it sheds on the experiences of black Congregationalists. More generally, the missionaries' writings demonstrate the complex ways in which African Americans situated themselves in the African diaspora.

This essay examines the writings, or mission discourse, generated by the missionaries who worked at Galangue and discusses the interpretations which missionaries ascribed to their experiences.³ The Galangue mission discourse contains tensions which arose as missionaries documented conflicts between the imagined Africa and the particular experiences of black Americans, who lived among the Ovimbundu, in the central highlands of Portuguese-colonized Angola. These missionaries understood themselves as essentially linked to Africa and the Ovimbundu, through race and the legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and saw this connection as central to their work.⁴ The Ovimbundu could never simply be "the other" or the exotic, for the missionaries saw themselves in the Ovimbundu: they were part of the same family.

The writings generated by the missionaries at Galangue served multiple functions. Missionaries informed their supporters of their activities and the progress of the mission. This information was intended to encourage support for Galangue in the form of funds, goods, and prayers. Throughout Galangue's existence, women's mission societies,

college students, and the missionaries' friends sent money and household items to supply the mission and make a direct connection with Angola. The circulars and magazine columns provided a focus for the supporters of Galangue and helped reinforce a sense of community among dispersed black Congregationalists.

Mission discourse occurred in multiple sites. Black Congregationalists sponsored a pamphlet dedicated to "news items from the field" and accounts of the supporters of Galangue.⁵ Missionaries wrote circulars, mimeographed letters sent by missionaries to various groups and constituencies, such as the National Convention of Congregational Workers Among Colored People, the Friends of Talladega College and Church, and students at AMA colleges such as Tougaloo College. They also wrote columns for the black Congregational periodicals, *The Southern News* and *The Amistad*. The private letters which missionaries sent to friends and associates circulated widely and excerpts from these letters appeared in mission periodicals.⁶ The formal reports which missionaries filed with the ABCFM often appeared, in altered forms, in pamphlets and the principal Congregational mission magazine, *The Missionary Herald*.

In its division by gender, the writings of the Galangue missionaries followed a pattern common in most Protestant mission periodicals. Women missionaries' writings appeared in the "women's pages" of the magazines and the topics focussed on areas of their presumed expertise, African women and children. The male missionaries usually had a higher profile than that of their female colleagues. Male missionaries' writings ranged widely and broached topics such as colonial politics, religious, and cultural change; these perspectives were privileged in the Galangue mission discourse.⁷

Reverend Henry Curtis McDowell's writings set the tone of Galangue's mission discourse. He was the public face of the mission. At his commissioning ceremony, he was described in the *Missionary Herald* as "the one man best fitted to inaugurate the new work."⁸ Although there does not seem to have been

serious conflicting points of view among the missionaries in this discourse, the coherence of the Galangue mission discourse comes, in part, from the prominence of McDowell's voice.⁹

The missionaries shaped their narratives to address the concerns of their African American readership. The missionaries knew their readers were passionately committed to Africa and they used this interest to instruct their audience and shape its opinions. The letters and circulars were not intended to be disinterested or encyclopedic. The commitment and engagement of the missionaries' writings were important components of this discourse.

The Galangue missionaries also engaged with the ways in which Africa, as a symbol and reality, was used in African American thought. The missionaries and their supporters operated within an influential intellectual and religious tradition that attempted to reconcile slavery, Christianity, and black Americans' relationship to Africa. From the 1700s, many abolitionists, black and white, saw Christian missions as a form of recompense for slavery. By the nineteenth century, a "providential theory" circulated widely in African American religious circles. According to this theory God had allowed some Africans to be taken into slavery and subsequently converted to Christianity. It was the special responsibility of the descendants of those slaves to introduce Christianity to their distant brothers and sisters. This theory provided an intellectual framework for African Americans' interest in African missions.¹⁰

Black Congregationalists began the Galangue mission as an experiment in autonomy within the white dominated church. In 1910, the Reverend Henry Hugh Proctor, an Atlanta-based minister, approached the secretary of the American Board of Congregational Missions (ABCFM), Cornelius Paton, with his idea of establishing a mission in Africa that would be supported by African American Congregationalists.¹¹ Reverend Proctor was the minister of the largest black Congregational Church in the South and wanted to create a project black Congregationalists could call their own.

Black Congregationalism was itself, in part, the product of missionary work.¹² During the Civil war and Reconstruction, Northern missionaries employed by the American Missionary Association (AMA), a group associated with the Congregational Church, provided economic relief and education for the freed people in the South.¹³ In the course of their work, AMA missionaries proselytized and succeeded in converting a small but committed core of African Americans.¹⁴ This group, along with the people who were converted by their experiences at AMA-schools and colleges, created the basis for the black Congregational community. By 1916 there were about 9,000 black Congregationalists in the South.¹⁵

The white-dominated AMA and Congregational Church officially supported interracial work in its schools, projects, and religious gatherings. Black Congregationalists, however, were often bitterly disappointed by the condescending attitude of white colleagues and by the bigotry, racial segregation, and racism within the church.¹⁶

Such discrimination extended to the church's foreign missions. In the 1880s and 1890s, four African Americans worked on ABCFM missions in Africa: Samuel Miller worked in Angola; Nancy Jones in Mozambique and Rhodesia; Benjamin and Henrietta Ousley in Mozambique. These missionaries worked with white colleagues and all experienced, in varying degrees, hostility which they attributed to racism. In the 1890s the ABCFM, like many other predominately white mission societies, stopped sending African Americans to its foreign missions.¹⁷

African American clergy and laity protested their treatment in the church. They also quietly worked to create realms within the church where they could realize their ambitions and practice their faith with minimal interference or direction from white colleagues. For African American Congregationalists, the Galangue project provided a congenial sphere in which they could act on their religious fervor and commitment to the African continent.

In 1915, Reverend Proctor and two other black clergymen established a fund of one hundred dollars

toward founding a mission station in Africa which would be run by black Americans.¹⁸ The project's progress was delayed until the ABCFM found a suitable location in southern Africa, where the Congregationalists conducted their mission work. Most of the colonial governments were hostile to African Americans in their territory because they feared that black Americans would incite discontent among the Africans. Only the Portuguese colonial authorities of Angola, who did not care for Protestant missionaries in general, voiced no objections to African American missionaries.¹⁹

With a guaranteed location, the AMA and the ABCFM forged an unusual arrangement to support this station. The "Colored Congregational Churches" and the AMA were jointly responsible for selecting the missionaries and raising funds to support the mission, while the ABCFM administered the mission. In 1917 the Congregational Church officially launched the enterprise. Alfred Lawless, the first black supervisor of the Colored Congregational Churches, became a tireless promoter and supporter of this African mission. For black Congregationalists, the support and funding of Galangue represented their maturity and independence within the church.²⁰

The first task for the project was selecting the missionaries. During the years of Galangue's existence as an African American mission, six missionaries - three married couples - worked on the station. All the missionaries were college graduates and were, by that measure, part of the elite of African American society.²¹ The founding couple was Reverend Henry Curtis McDowell and his wife Bessie Fonvielle McDowell. The McDowells were both graduates of the AMA-associated Talladega College. Before his selection, McDowell was the pastor of a church in Chattanooga. The McDowells and their child arrived in Angola in 1919. They initially worked at an established station in order to learn the language and survey a site for their mission. In 1922 the McDowells and an Ovimbundu couple, Mr. and Mrs. Chitue, established the Galangue station. In the following year Samuel Bracy Coles, his wife Bertha Terry, and their daughter arrived in Angola. Samuel Coles had known the McDowells at

Talladega College. Bertha Coles joined Bessie McDowell in working among the Ovimbundu women and girls, the “women's work” of the station. Samuel Coles supervised the mission's farm and physical plant. Aaron and Willena McMillan were the final missionary couple on staff. Aaron McMillan was a medical doctor in Omaha, Nebraska. After serving a term in the state legislature, he was overcome with a spiritual calling to work in Africa. The McMillans were Baptist, but because the ABCFM had a non-denominational policy, they were welcome to work at Galangue. The McMillans and their children arrived in Angola in 1931. Aaron McMillan established the mission's hospital and his wife, though not formally trained as a nurse, was his principal assistant.²²

In form and function, the Galangue mission resembled other mainstream, Protestant missions of its time and place. Under Reverend McDowell's leadership, the mission pursued evangelism, education, social welfare, agriculture, and western medicine. It was run with the cooperation of the local Ovimbundu, Christian and non-Christian. Because this was a mission run by African Americans in a predominately white church and because of the historic ties between Africa and black Americans, the missionaries saw Galangue as different from other missions, with a special place in history. This sense of distinction ran through the narratives created by African American missionaries for their supporters.²³

What follows is a discussion of some prominent themes and concerns in the Galangue missionaries' writings. This is not a comprehensive account of this mission discourse. I have chosen the themes discussed here to illustrate the ways in which missionaries explored aspects of their identity and their place in the African diaspora.

Mission Writings and Galangue

Information

The mission discourse was intended to be, among many other things, didactic.²⁴ The Galangue missionaries used the authority of their position to

provide their readers with information about Africa and Africans.²⁵ Missionaries were aware that in the popular culture of the West, Africa was a symbol of depravity. Some African Americans responded to this negative image by disavowing any significant links to Africa and Africans. For other black Americans, Africa and its glorious, albeit mythic, past became a source of pride and a rallying point for African American nationalism and uplift ideology.²⁶ These views had little to do with the way Africans lived and experienced their environments and were ultimately concerned with the place of African Americans within the United States.²⁷ The missionaries engaged with, and often wrote against, these perspectives as they attempted to inform their readers about Africa.

Missionaries, like travel writers and explorers, attempted to make the unfamiliar familiar. In one 1919 circular, Reverend McDowell simultaneously disabused his readers of their fanciful preconceptions about African geography and also assured them that a specific location in Angola was, indeed, just like home.

We are accustomed to think of it [Africa] as the Sahara Desert and jungles of coconut trees and monkeys. I saw about ½ doz. coconut trees at the coast and not one since. I haven't seen nor heard of the African monkey yet. Lobita reminds one of Florida and our station is very much like Talladega with its iron mts. and red soil.

As to the natives they are like American Negroes in that they have shades of color. They only need a few more clothes to make them look the same.²⁸

The missionaries used detail and specificity to confront stereotypes about Africa and also to link the reader with the African continent and its people. This use of detail implicitly countered the monolithic, undifferentiated Africa which was a staple of western thought, and also of many black Americans' construction of Africa.

Many of the details which missionaries wrote about

focussed on the Ovimbundu and can loosely be described as ethnology or ethnography. For example, in the circulars readers learned about the particulars of Ovimbundu grammar as the missionaries struggled to learn the language.²⁹

Some information about the Ovimbundu simply repeated commonplaces of missionary discourse, such as when Bertha Coles wrote that the “man is the sun of the African Universe while woman is the moon, without man, woman has no place in the scheme of things.”³⁰ In a different vein, Reverend McDowell wrote that the “Umbundu Way of Life” was full of spirituality, but “without a Saviour their very fine ideal and excellent culture have been as a ship without a rudder.”³¹ Missionaries used these details to delineate the similarities and differences between the Ovimbundu and African American missionaries. As Joan Jacobs Brumberg has demonstrated, ethnographic descriptions have long served this function in mission writing.³² By reporting ethnographic details, the missionaries made the Ovimbundu less cartoonish and strange and accorded some value to the Ovimbundu culture. These descriptions also carried with them western assumptions and biases, and a contention that, to the extent that the Ovimbundu became Christian, their world would have to be changed.

Competing Diasporas

The Galangue missionaries reminded their supporters that mission work was the best way for African Americans to demonstrate their commitment to Africa. These missionaries competed with other black Americans who offered alternative ways of understanding and enacting the diaspora. These alternatives, which the missionaries perceived as a threat to their work, included the Communist movement and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). These radical groups shared with the missionaries a commitment to the diaspora and African peoples, but missionaries resisted the political base of this commitment and anything that hinted of mass emigration from the United States to Africa.³³

Most missionaries saw international communism as atheistic, inimical to their interests, and a potential danger to the colonial order of Angola. According to McDowell, the Portuguese used the threat of “Bolshevism” as a pretext to suppress Africans.³⁴ The UNIA received more attention than communism in the missionaries' writing and appeared to be the greater threat both in Angola and the United States. Colonial authorities regarded Marcus Garvey and his movement as a real threat and suspected that African American missionaries, because of their race, were potential allies of Garvey. Black missionaries found their ability to work threatened by the suspicion that they were fifth columnists for the UNIA. While in Portugal, Samuel and Bertha Coles were rumored to be agents of the UNIA, set upon fomenting revolution in Angola. It was only with the intervention of ABCFM officials, who vouched for the Coles, that they were able to continue their language training.³⁵

Missionaries warned their supporters from the UNIA's siren song and its vision of how Africans and African Americans should interact. The mission movement and the UNIA competed for supporters as they both appealed to black Americans who wanted a connection with Africa.

The missionaries' critique of the UNIA went beyond simple competition. McDowell trenchantly criticized Marcus Garvey and the UNIA's plans for settlement in Africa as imperialistic in all but name.

Should Marcus Garvey and his crowd . . . come into possession of this part of Africa, it would be a sad day for natives. A black exploiter is as despicable as a white exploiter. Our way is the only way to give them an education that is Christian and a bearing so they can live and thrive with their neighbor whether he be white or black.³⁶

McDowell's criticism of the UNIA and Garvey arose not only out of self-interest, but also out of a different vision of Africa's future. The missionaries were convinced that the only way to help Angolans cope with their changing world was through Christianity and western education, not African American

settlement or overrule.

Missionaries and Race Prejudice

In their writings, missionaries documented the shifting nature of their relationships with whites once they left the United States. An important aspect of imagining the diaspora, for many black Americans, was the belief that outside the United States, they would be able to live free of their homeland's constricting segregation and prejudice. Missionaries reported incidents that confirmed and complicated these expectations. During the voyage out, the McDowells experienced encounters unimaginable in the South. On their way to Lisbon, the McDowell's ship called at the Azores and they found themselves in the company of a cotton broker from North Carolina, who joined their party onshore. McDowell remarked laconically, "He was a jolly good fellow with me in Azores. I do not know how he would have been in Wilmington, N.C."³⁷ In this case, the racial norms of the United States were apparently suspended in favor of national identity.

The missionaries described how they fit into the Portuguese system of race, class, and color. To their delight, they found that the Portuguese did not enforce a color bar and accorded them a respect unimaginable in the United States. The missionaries' education and profession gave them a high status. In describing this unusual situation, the missionaries often claimed that the Portuguese were free of race prejudice.

During the missionaries' stay in Angola, they learned the nuances of this system of race, class, and color. For example, black women did not receive the respect that their male counterparts did. McDowell, writing to a colleague, insisted that any African American woman missionary should travel with a male escort in Portugal and Angola, unlike white American women. Black women would be subject to prejudice and harassment from the Portuguese.

Whereas a mulatto or even a coal black man is accepted on equal terms, a mulatto woman or a black woman has no rights to be

respected. They are not prejudiced against them, it is just immorality full grown.³⁸

Further, African Americans received better treatment from the Portuguese than Angolans did. Angolans who were not *assimilados* had few rights. McDowell claimed that to the Portuguese colonizer, "a poor ignorant native is to him an object of scorn and is treated as tho' he were lower than a dog."³⁹ The contrast in the treatment of African Americans and Africans pained the missionaries, because they saw themselves as basically equal to the Angolans. These discrepancies, based on culture, class, and gender, highlighted the qualified nature of the Portuguese "lack of prejudice."

The Family

African American missionaries were convinced that they had a deep, abiding connection with the Ovimbundu among whom they worked. The missionaries constructed this connection along two axes: an essential bond of race and a comparable history.

The first axis was the claim that African Americans and the Ovimbundu were family, in both the metaphoric and literal sense. The claim of family membership required an understanding of race that was based on a common essence or "blood." Thus, the missionaries celebrated the physical similarities they saw between the Ovimbundu and themselves. Physical similarities were only the first marker of a homecoming. Shortly after arriving in Angola, McDowell wrote to an ABCFM official:

As to our new home, we never felt more at home in our lives. Unlike most missionaries, we came among people, the sort of which we were born and reared among. Of course these similarities cannot be pushed too far, but as to color, physique, and general facial expression we are always seeing somebody precisely like somebody we know at home.⁴⁰

Despite linguistic and cultural differences, the missionaries described the Ovimbundu as being just

like them. McDowell further claimed that the Ovimbundu were more comfortable with the black missionaries than the white ones.⁴¹ The African American missionaries intended to use this connection to the advantage of the Ovimbundu. The missionaries maintained that this racial alliance made African Americans more effective missionaries than their white counterparts, thereby creating a special niche for black missionaries.⁴²

These bonds were completed when the Ovimbundu recognized the African American missionaries as family. The McDowells held an open house over Christmas and they informed their readers that this was an opportunity for a family reunion of sorts.

[W]e showed them photographs of many of you - their brethren in 'Oputu' (America). They find many precisely like folks that they know, and when they do it causes a joyous shout from the whole crowd. It is great to hear their exclamations at seeing some of the dignitaries in America. They look at the faces of some of our professors and others and cry out, 'Hayo ocimbundu ocili' - literally, 'There you, a true native!'⁴³

Despite the celebratory ways in which the black missionaries noted the Ovimbundu's recognition of African Americans as "natives," the missionaries were forced to recognize that the Ovimbundu did not understand the connection between themselves in the same way. Rather, the Ovimbundu saw the cultural division between themselves and missionaries as important. In a letter to a colleague, Reverend McDowell indicated the tensions between the Ovimbundu and the missionaries.

The natives have two general terms: 'Ovimbundu and Ovindele'. Ovimbundu means natives of the country in their native state. When an Ovimbundu becomes educated and wears European clothes and shoes, he is called an 'okacindele'. . . All foreigners, whether white or black are called ovindele and there is little distinction on the

basis of color. Their psychology is very interesting. We missionaries encourage them to call us 'alongisi' which means teacher.⁴⁴

Because of their differences in culture, the Ovimbundu, in their own terms, did not necessarily see the missionaries as members of the their family. The use of the family metaphor, then, was not fully reciprocated.⁴⁵

The second axis on which the relationship between missionaries and Ovimbundu was constructed was an interpretation of history. Because of their comparable experiences of oppression due to color and culture, African American missionaries assumed that they had a common cause with and insight into the Ovimbundu. In 1923 Reverend McDowell wrote:

What [the African] needs is direction and leadership, and not charity. The natives have a proverb to the effect that 'a native knows a native and is thus harder on him.' I am afraid that is really true and that it takes colored folks to be hard on colored folks. The fellows had a great way of putting it during my school days. They said that many of the good devoted white missionaries from the North would advise, sympathize, and weep over us, and the hard colored teachers would tell us about 'our raisin,' and 'where we came from.' I presume we need both.⁴⁶

Reverend McDowell also compared the ways in which the Portuguese treated African workers to the labor regime to which African Americans were subjected in the South. Africans were often forced to work, and as in the US, employers plied the Africans with "whiskey, women, and opportunity to gamble."⁴⁷

These historical analogies and family metaphors helped the missionaries forge a connection with the Ovimbundu. Despite the joyful sense of recognition, these connections carried within them tensions. This was a connection that originated from, and was framed by, the African American missionaries. In the discourse there was no sense of frames of reference originating from the Ovimbundu. The mission

discourse, which presumed that the Ovimbundu reciprocated the missionaries' perspective, required the suppression of Ovimbundu's alternative ways of understanding the relationship between missionaries and the Ovimbundu. The Ovimbundu's silence and passivity in framing the discourse indicates how profoundly western this discourse was.

Missionaries and Colonialism

The Galangue missionaries presented a complex perspective on colonialism to their supporters. Although black missionaries tended to be against colonialism, they did not see colonial rule ending any time soon and therefore adopted a pragmatic attitude of working within the system. They protested against Portuguese abuse of Africans, yet they also wanted to maintain cordial relations with the colonial authorities. Occasionally the missionaries found that their position as African Americans in colonized Angola put them in conflict with their asserted alliance with the Ovimbundu.

The missionaries found some aspects of Portuguese colonialism, in particular the policy of assimilation, attractive. Assimilation, in theory, offered Africans the promise of citizenship provided they accepted Portuguese culture.⁴⁸ By contrast, many African Americans in the United States were unable to exercise fully their rights of citizenship. Colonial Angola, by this measure, compared favorably with the United States from the perspective of African Americans.⁴⁹ Although the missionaries valued Ovimbundu culture, the requirements of assimilation also complemented the mission's goals.

Reverend McDowell argued that Portuguese colonialism compared favorably with other colonial regimes and promoted this perspective in the United States. He wrote to Robert Abbot, the publisher of the Chicago Defender, suggesting that a deputation of black Americans be sent to Angola to study and publicize the situation of Africans.

Personally, I take absolutely no stock in the anticipation of any considerable portion of Africa passing wholly into the hands of

colored people, Americans, native Africans, or what not: and I am Negro to the core. However, there is a great opportunity for Negroes to become constituent parts of Latin civilizations, as I am afraid they may not become a constituent part of Anglo-Saxon civilization.⁵⁰

The issue of slavery and forced labor brought into relief the contradictions of the missionaries' place in colonial Angola and in the diaspora. The missionaries decided not to allow "domestic" slaves to use the mission as a refuge from their masters. Samuel Coles explained to mission supporters Galangue's policy.

First these people [slaves] are not coming here for the WORD as some of them say, and secondly that we have the cart before the horse. The thing that must be done to help the poor slaves is to change the heart of the slaveholder. . . Domestic slavery is the worst thing that there is in all Africa. It takes all the life and self respect out of its victims. Therefore we are trying to change the hearts of the slave holders because we know that when we rescue a slave we have only rescued his body and not his soul.⁵¹

Although the missionaries used history to draw connections between themselves and the Ovimbundu, the situation of slavery in Angola illustrated the limits of these connections. In their own history, African Americans saw the experience of liberation from slavery in religious and political terms. However, in Angola the missionaries did not free slaves from their political status and instead focussed on liberating the Ovimbundu from the slavery of "heathenism" through Christianity.

Galangue's End

Changes among black Congregationalists in the United States and in Galangue combined to end the experiment of an all-African American mission station. During the 1930s, black Congregationalists found it nearly impossible to sustain the necessary levels of financial support for the station due to the

Great Depression and the dispersal of church members as they migrated to the North. Organizational changes within the church further fragmented black Congregational identity. The Congregational Church merged with the Christian Church in 1931. Blacks in the Christian Church had no tradition of supporting missions and diluted the support base of Galangue. In 1936 the AMA transferred the management of the black Congregational churches to the Congregational Board of Home Missions. This new sponsoring body had scant interest in foreign missions and shared none of the historic links between the AMA, black Congregationalists, and missions.⁵²

In the 1930s, several unrelated factors left the Galangue mission shorthanded. When the ABCFM retrenched its finances due to the depression, Samuel and Bertha Coles were "loaned" to a mission in Liberia, the Booker T. Washington Agriculture and Industrial Institute, in 1935 and 1936. Several years later, when the Coles were on their regularly scheduled furlough in the United States, the progress of World War II prevented their return to Angola until the war's end. Bessie McDowell's serious illnesses led the McDowells to take a leave of absence in 1937. Henry McDowell became the principal of an AMA school in North Carolina. Bessie McDowell died there in 1942. The McMillans worked steadily in Galangue through the war. In 1940, when they were the only missionaries on the station, Laurretta Dibble transferred from a neighboring ABCFM station to help them. She became the first non-black missionary stationed at Galangue. In 1947 the McMillans resigned and returned to Omaha, where Dr. McMillan re-established his medical practice. The Coles remained at Galangue until 1950. The Coles' departure represented the end of black Congregationalist involvement with Galangue. Reverend McDowell returned to Angola with his second wife in 1947, but worked at a different station.⁵³

The writings of the Galangue missionaries originated from Angola but were shot through with the preoccupations of African Americans in the United

States and abroad. In these writings the missionaries continually worked out their encounters with not a monolithic, mythic Africa, but a specific place in Angola inhabited by specific people.

The passionate commitment of the missionaries to Galangue is evidence of the importance that black Americans accorded to their connection with Africa. Black Americans characterized their deep attachment to the Ovimbundu in terms of family. The family metaphor invoked the historical connections of African Americans with Africa and comparable historical experiences of the Ovimbundu and black Americans with racial discrimination and oppression. The fact of calling the Ovimbundu family, however, did not conceal the tensions that qualified this connection. These tensions revolved around interpretations of race and culture. Abroad, the missionaries experienced their skin color, their race, in ways that were unimaginable in the United States. They were discomfited, however, by the different values which the Ovimbundu attached to color and culture. Further, their experiences in colonized Angola, their encounters with Portuguese and Africans, and their occupation as missionaries, highlighted the ways in which the African Americans fit, however uneasily, into the West. The narratives the African American missionaries told their supporters reveal the limitations, strengths, and ambiguities of a diasporic identity.

©2000 Modupe Labode. Any archiving, redistribution, or republication of this text in any medium requires the consent of the author.

1. Research for this paper was made possible by generous assistance from the History Department, Iowa State University, Iowa State University Research Grant Number 701-17-21-95-0011, the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute, Harvard University, and the program in Black Women in Church in Society, the Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

2. H.C. McDowell, circular, 7 February 1930, ABCFM archive, ABC 39:2, p. 2, Houghton Library, Harvard University. For the Mbundu translation, Bessie F. McDowell, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing/ Amanu Petuki," HCM/Ang.4/1/1, Savery Library, Talladega College. See also Charles Johnson, "An Ever-Lifting Song of Black America," *New York Times*, 14 February 1999, Arts Section, p. 1, p. 34.

3. The term "mission discourse" comes from V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 44-47.

4. I use the term "essential" here on purpose, for this is how many African Americans of the late nineteenth century understood their relationship to Africans. The tensions arising from this perspective are discussed below.

5. H.C. McDowell to National Convention of Congregational Workers Among Colored People, 12 July 1920, ABCFM archive, ABC 15.1, v. 23, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

6. This practice was followed in the home mission movement as well. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 105.

7. This preference implicitly reinforced a tendency in African American writing about the diaspora which made Africa a touchstone for black masculinity. Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 107.

8. "Good News for Africa," *Missionary Herald*, (November 1918): 492.

9. The Congregationalists expected McDowell to be an exemplar. When the ABCFM sent letters of reference for McDowell, the referees were informed: "Mr. McDowell is being considered as a pioneer missionary with reference to a plan to establish new work in W. Africa representing the Colored Cong. Churches of America. As the responsibilities will be unusually exacting your opinion is especially asked as to his fitness for this movement." "Application for H.C. McDowell," Reference from J.M.P. Metcalf, ABCFM archive, ABC 6, v. 140, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

The foreign secretary of the ABCFM reminded McDowell that he was considered the figurehead of the African American Congregationalists: "You represent a body of Southern churches that are just coming into this work, so that in your representative capacity you are more than a single individual or new family going into the Mission." James L. Barton to H.C. McDowell, 6 February 1918, HCM/Ang.2/2, Savery Library, Talladega College.

10. Albert J. Raboteau, " 'Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Forth Her Hands': Black Destiny in Nineteenth-Century America," in *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 37-56; Walter Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877-1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 7-8.

11. "How Galangue Came Upon the Map," Cornelius Patton, 6 February 1928, ABCFM archive, ABC 15.1, v. 21, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

12. For the history of African Americans in the Congregational church see, Clara Merritt DeBoer, "Blacks and the American Missionary Association," in *Hidden Histories of the United Church of Christ*, edited by Barbara Brown Zikmund, (New York: United Church Press, 1984), 81-94; A. Knighton Stanley, *The Children Is Crying: Congregationalism Among Black People* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1979).

13. The AMA was not officially recognized as part of the Congregational church until 1913. A. Knighton Stanley, 20, 25.

14. For the AMA's work among the freed slaves see, Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865-1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); Joe Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986).

15. Lawrence W. Henderson, *Galangue: The Unique Story of a Mission Station in Angola Proposed, Supported, and Staffed by Black Americans* (NY: United Church Board for World Ministries, 1986), 8.

16. For increasing segregation of the Congregational church in the South, see Richard H. Taylor, *Southern Congregational Churches* (Benton Harbor, Michigan: 1994), 36-41; A. Knighton Stanley, 101-102. For discussions of interracial work and its difficulties during this time, see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 177-78; Higginbotham, 89-90.

17. For the experiences of black missionaries on Congregational missions see Williams, 22; Sylvia M. Jacobs, "Give a Thought to Africa: Black Women Missionaries in Southern Africa," in *Western Women and Imperialism*, edited by Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 209-213; Henderson (1986), 10-11.

African American missionaries faced discrimination within predominately white mission societies, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, many predominately white mission societies stopped sending black missionaries to their missions. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Missionaries," *Crisis*, (May 1929): 168.

18. Henderson (1986), 12.

19. "How Galangue Came Upon the Map," Cornelius H. Patton, 6 February 1928, ABCFM archive, ABC 15.1, v. 21, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Black missionaries in southern Africa faced harassment and opposition to their work from colonial officials; colonial officials thought that black Americans would stir up resentment among Africans. See Carol A. Page, "Colonial reaction to AME Missionaries in South Africa, 1898-1910," in *Black Americans and the Missionary Movement in*

- Africa*, edited by Sylvia M. Jacobs, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 177-196; Edwin W. Smith, *The Christian Mission in Africa* (London: International Missionary Council, 1926), 122-25.
20. "Good News for Africa," *Missionary Herald*, (November) 1918: 492; Henderson (1986), 30.
21. In 1917, 2,132 black Americans were enrolled in college; in 1927 there were 13,580. From David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 157-158.
22. Henderson (1986), 16-17, 27.
23. For information on the Galangue mission see, Lillie M. Johnson, "Missionary-Government Relations: Black Americans in British and Portuguese Colonies," in *Black Americans and the Missionary Movement in Africa*, edited by Sylvia M. Jacobs (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 197-215.
24. Missionaries, explorers, and tourists often used their experiences to provide education, presumably non-biased, about other peoples and places to their readers at home. For missionaries, Annie Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and the Popular Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994): 164-68. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).
25. Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 39.
26. For African Americans' use of Africa in making history, see Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
27. For African Americans' valorization of the African past see, Moses; St. Claire Drake, *The Redemption of Africa and Black Religion* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1970), 48-53; Kevin Gaines, "Black Americans' Racial Uplift Ideology as 'Civilizing Mission': Pauline E. Hopkins on Race and Imperialism," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, edited by Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 433-455.
28. H.C. McDowell, Circular, 16 September 1919, HCM/Ang.2/4/3, Savery Library, Talladega College.
29. H.C. McDowell, circular, 13 March 1919, HCM/Ang 2/4/3, Savery Library, Talladega College.
30. Mrs. Samuel Coles, "The African Woman," *The Amistad*, (n.d.) in ABCFM archive, ABC 15:18, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
31. H.C. McDowell, "Galangue News," *The Amistad* (February 1935): 5.
32. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, "Zenanas and Girlless Villages: The Ethnology of American Evangelical Women, 1870-1910," *The Journal of American History*, vol. 69, no. 2, (September 1982): 347-371.
33. For communist and UNIA activities in Africa see, *Imagining Home: Class, Culture and Nationalism in the African Diaspora*, edited by Sidney LeMelle and Robin D.G. Kelley (London: Verso, 1994); Robert A. Hill and Gregory A. Pirio, "'Africa for the Africans': The Garvey Movement in South Africa, 1920-1940," in *The Politics of Race, Class, and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, edited by Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido

(London: Longman, 1987): 209-253; Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

34. H.C. McDowell to D.J. Flynn, 25 May 1920, HCM/Ang.2/5/1, Savery Library, Talladega Library.

35. Samuel Coles to Earnest Riggs, 18 August 1922, ABCFM archive, ABC 15.1, v. 22, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

36. H.C. McDowell to Frank Brewer, 22 August 1922, HCM/Ang.2/7/2, Savery Library, Talladega College.

37. H.C. McDowell to National Convention of Congregational Workers Among Colored People, 12 July 1920, ABCFM archive, ABC 15.1, v. 23, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

38. H.C. McDowell to Enoch F. Bell, 22 September 1921, ABCFM archive, ABC 15.1, v. 23, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

39. H.C. McDowell, circular, 12 July 1920, ABCFM archive, ABC 15.1, vol. 23, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

40. H.C. McDowell to Dr. James L. Barton, 25 November 1919, HCM/Ang.2/4/4, Savery Library, Talladega College.

41. H.C. McDowell to B.F. Ousley, n.d., 1920?, HCM/Ang.2/5/1, Savery Library, Talladega College.

42. Samuel B. Coles, *Preacher With A Plow* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957): 217-228.

43. "A New Year's Letter from Ochileso," *Missionary Herald* (May 1920): 242.

44. H.C. McDowell to Rev. Frank S. Brewer, 22 August 1922, HCM/Ang.2/7/2, Savery Library, Talladega College.

45. I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this tension.

46. H.C. McDowell, circular, 9 October 1923, ABCFM archive, ABC 15.1, vol. 23, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

47. H.C. McDowell to Alfred Lawless, 1 June 1920, ABCFM archive, ABC 15.1, vol. 23, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

48. Coles, (1957), 155-176. In 1950 approximately 30,000 Angolans, out of a population of 4 million, were "assimilated." Eduardo de Sousa Ferreira, *Portuguese Colonialism in Africa: The End of an Era* (Paris: Unesco Press, 1974): 115.

49. H.C. McDowell to J.E.K. Aggrey, 26 January 1922, HCM/Ang.2/7/2, Savery Library, Talladega College.

50. H.C. McDowell to Robert S. Abbot, 6 February 1924, HCM/Ang.2/9/2, Savery Library, Talladega College.

51. Samuel B. Coles, circular, 30 August 1922, ABCFM archive, ABC 15.5, v. 22, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

52. Henderson (1986), 29-30; A. Knighton Stanley, 91-105; J.T. Stanley, 92-95.

53. Henderson (1986), 33-35.