

Cuban Teachers in Angola: South-South Cooperation, Transfers of Knowledge and Mutual Perceptions¹

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RESÜMEE

Der kubanische Staatschef Fidel Castro definierte Kuba 1975 als eine „lateinamerikanisch-afrikanische Nation“. Diese Ankündigung war überraschend, denn seit dem Verbot des Rassismus nach der Revolution waren Diskussionen über die afrikanische Herkunft eines großen Teils der kubanischen Bevölkerung Tabu. Castro benötigte jedoch einerseits Tausende von Freiwilligen für die militärische und zivile Kooperation mit dem unabhängigen Angola, andererseits musste er den größten transatlantischen Auslandseinsatz in der Geschichte Kubas politisch rechtfertigen. Diese damit implizierte Annahme einer gemeinsam-geteilten Identität von Kubanern und Angolanern ist der Ausgangspunkt für neue Überlegungen zur Bedeutung des Konzepts des „Black Atlantic“. Sie basieren auf meinem kürzlich beendeten Postdoc-Forschungsprojekt über die kubanisch-angolanischen Kooperation im Bildungsbereich: Kubaner in Angola. Süd-Süd-Kooperation und Bildungstransfer 1976–1991.

In December of 1975, in a public speech to the members of the Cuban Communist Party, head of state Fidel Castro defined Cuba as a “Latin American-African Nation”. This announcement was surprising for his audience, because matters of race had never been addressed publicly in Cuba following the official prohibition of racism after the Revolution in 1959. This promotion of a new transnational identity primarily fulfilled the following purposes: on the one hand the Cuban government urgently needed thousands of

1 This is an extended version of my oral contribution to the international conference “Being on the Move. Transfers, Emancipation and Formations of the Black Atlantic” held in Erfurt, Germany, on 1-3 July 2010. I thank the organizers Jürgen Martschukat and Gesa Mackenthun, for inviting me to participate, and especially Patricia Wiegmann and Nora Kreuzenbeck, who invited me to submit a textual version of my presentation.

Cuban volunteers to fight and to work for Angola's independence from Portugal in order to fulfill what would be the largest internationalist and transatlantic military and civil mission in the history of Cuba. They needed the support of all Cuban citizens, at least one-third of whom had African ancestry. On the other hand Castro had to deliver a convincing political justification for this large-scale engagement in Angola. Castro therefore invented a joint tradition and underlined the "blood relationship" between Cubans and Africans, attributable to their common colonial past, the slave trade and the Cuban war of independence. He constructed this transatlantic space for interaction, which sounds like an "avant la lettre" construction of what came to be known two decades later as the "Black Atlantic": From this point of view the Cuban-Angolan cooperation that lasted from 1975 to 1991 could be regarded as a large-scale reverse transatlantic movement in which Cuban descendants of former slaves were called to return to support their "relatives". This definition of Cuba as a "Latin American-African Nation" and the connected assumption that Africans and Cubans shared a common destiny are the starting point for some reconsiderations of the meanings of a "Black Atlantic". These reflections are based on the example of the civil cooperation in education of Cuba and Angola between 1976 and 1991, the subject of my recently finished post-doctoral research project, *Cubans in Angola: South-South Cooperation and Educational Transfers, 1976–1991*.² In this research project I examined a unique example of a transatlantic South-South cooperation of two formerly colonized countries. Furthermore this cooperation marked in its quantitative and qualitative aspects – scope, intensity, and duration – something absolutely new in the African-Latin American history of the 20th century. Angola's achievement of independence from Portugal on 11 November 1975 and the first fifteen years of its postcolonial existence are inextricably tied to the Cuban military involvement in favor of the left-wing anti-colonial movement *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA) and later government, because about 370,000 Cuban soldiers were sent to Angola until 1991. But Angola's postcolonial existence is also tied to the Cuban civil cooperation of about 50,000 doctors, teachers, engineers and construction workers, who provided extensive reconstruction aid parallel to the military involvement. Around 10,000 of the Cuban civilians worked in the educational field.³ A significant transatlantic transfer of

2 The article is based on some of the findings of my post-doctoral project, completed in 2009 at the Historical Institute of the University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany (forthcoming publication: Oldenbourg Verlag, Munich). The project was carried out through numerous periods of field and archive research in Cuba, Angola, Portugal and the U.S. between 2004 and 2006 thanks to the support of a research grant from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Council). Sources and information consisted not only of extensive archival material, particularly from Angolan archives, but also of 139 interviews with Cuban and Angolan witnesses. With the exception of interviews with persons in public life, the names of the witnesses were made anonymous. The archive materials and ministry files from the Cuban Ministry of Education (MINED) and the Angolan Ministry of Education (MED) are not classified and are quoted with their full title for the purposes of unambiguous identification.

3 Between 1975 and 1991 almost 380,000 Cuban soldiers fought on the side of the MPLA in order to defend their power against the internal rivals and external enemies and about 50,000 Cuban civilians worked in Angola in order to establish a health service, an educational system and a new social infrastructure, as doctors, teachers, technicians, advisers or construction workers.

ideas and knowledge between the two countries occurred during this cooperation in education.

The topic is therefore suitable for re-thinking the usefulness of applying the concept of a “Black Atlantic” as an analytical framework in order to write a transnational history that aims to focus on the movements and transfers of persons, experiences and knowledge between Cuba and Angola. Due to the limited space of this article, I will focus my attention mainly on two points: Firstly I will explain how this transatlantic space of interaction was filled with transfers of knowledge, focusing on the individuals who carried out this cooperation. Secondly I will raise the issue of the direct encounter between Cubans and Angolans who met on the spot, including self-perceptions and mutual perceptions. Did this personal encounter reflect the assumed common bond of people on both sides of the Atlantic? First I will give some brief background information about the state of research, my approach, my sources and the historical context.

1. State of Research

Until today only political, military or diplomatic histories had been published on the topic, most of them limited to the highly political aspect of the degree to which Cubans were Soviet proxies.⁴ All these publications offer little more than a “big picture” version of Cold War history, with the Soviet Union and their “proxies” as the main actors on one side and the USA and their “proxies” on the other side. An Angolan interpretation of the history of their independence hardly exists to this day. The Cuban government itself created a kind of mythical meta-narrative of a victorious military intervention in Angola, claiming to have contributed significantly to the breakdown of the apartheid regime by defeating the South Africans in the battle of Cuito Cuanavale in southeast Angola in 1988. It also claims to have contributed to the independence of Namibia from South Africa in 1990. In Cuba until today no other interpretation of the Cuban-Angolan cooperation is admitted.

My approach to the topic produced very different results. On the one hand the research highlighted the active role of the MPLA government as the driving force, whereas in the past all interpretations tended to attribute a passive role to the Angolans and, in a uni-directional sense, attributed the active part in this cooperation to the Cubans. On the other hand I chose the perspective of those whose personal biographies crossed the Atlantic and met in Angola or in Cuba – because their governments decided to start this cooperation and interconnected their destinies in this given historical Cold War constellation. This focus required a multi-perspective approach through comparisons and interrelations, connecting different levels of institutional and personal perspectives:

4 The best post-Cold War publications on the topic are: Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959–1976*, Chapel Hill (N.C.)/London 2002 (focused mainly on the political and diplomatic history ending in 1976); Edward George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965–1991: From Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale*, London/New York 2005 (focused on military history).

the official and public discourses of both governments; the unofficial level, covering the institutions and the structures of the cooperation; and the personal level, covering the biographies of the persons involved, the life histories of the Cubans and Angolans whose memories I recorded in biographical interviews with 139 contemporary witnesses.⁵ Especially these biographical interviews offered an insight in everything beyond the “big picture”: disappointments, culture shock, misunderstandings, sacrifices and traumata, as well as considerations about identity, self-perception and the perception of the other. One of the main lessons learned from this was the impression that the history of success that the Cuban government still asserts did not necessarily affect everyday life.

2. The Cuban-Angolan Relationship and the “Latin American-African Nation”

The victory of the Cuban Revolution coincided in 1960 with the de-colonization of seventeen African colonies – a process observed with much sympathy in Cuba. Therefore many contacts between African and Cuban political leaders were established in the early 1960s. The first to receive Cuban military support was the Algerian liberation movement *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) for its struggle against French colonial rule. In 1962 it also received the first civilian aid through a dozen Cuban doctors. In 1965 the Angolan MPLA leaders met the former Cuban Industry Minister Ernesto Che Guevara during his Congo expedition and got some Cuban military support. But the starting point for a close Cuban-Angolan cooperation was the military weakness of the MPLA ten years later. The demands for a Cuban engagement in Angola took place under the influence of the historical changes and hardships during the transition from the colonial period to independence.⁶ On the eve of independence the MPLA had to fight against rival liberation movements such as the *Frente Nacional para a Libertação de Angola* (FNLA) and *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA), and also to cope with the threat of a powerful South African military intervention. The MPLA expected the Cuban government not only to provide military support to overcome the military conflict to achieve independence, but ultimately comprehensive help in building a new socialist society. That is why the leader of the MPLA, Agostinho Neto, asked the Cuban govern-

5 During several field researches in Cuba, Angola, the U.S., and Portugal between 2004 and 2006 I interviewed Cuban and Angolan eyewitnesses. The Cubans (106 Persons) had all participated as civil cooperants, some of them also as soldiers. Nine of them lived in exile in the U.S., the others remained in Cuba. The Angolan eyewitnesses (33 Persons) had cooperated with the Cuban specialists or had been their students in Angolan schools; five of them lived in Portugal. The majority of my eyewitnesses (Angolans and Cubans) were people who were simply involved in this cooperation p.e. as teachers or as pupils; 28 of them held responsible positions within this civil cooperation as organizers, planners or politicians.

6 The extremely complex political and social situation of Angola before and after independence cannot be discussed in detail within the framework of this article. I therefore refer to several seminal historical, political and social science studies which are concerned with various aspects of the process of decolonization, e.g. Patrick Chabal/Nuno Vidal (eds.), *Angola: The Weight of History*, London 2007; Christine Messiant, *L'Angola postcolonial*, v. 1: *Guerre et paix sans démocratisation*, Paris 2008 and *L'Angola postcolonial*, v. 2: *Sociologie politique d'une oléocratie*, Paris 2008; David Birmingham, *Frontline Nationalism in Angola and Mozambique*, Oxford 1992.

ment for military aid in the spring of 1975. The Cuban response was hesitant but finally positive: In the days before Angolan independence in November 1975, Cuba provided the support of elite troops and thousands of soldiers, and coordinated the financial and military support of the USSR.

Ultimately only massive Cuban military presence made possible the victory of the MPLA over rival anti-colonial movements and the defeat of the South-African intervention. Nevertheless the victory of the MPLA, who formed the first post-colonial government, remained highly controversial. Having achieved political power after independence, the MPLA controlled little more than the Angolan capital Luanda. In November 1975 they still had to gain not only military but also political and administrative control over the whole country and had to win over the minds of the Angolan people in order to consolidate their power and to continue the struggle against their internal and external rivals, UNITA and the South African government. The latter had furthermore the covert support of the US government in order to stop a so-called communist menace in Southern-Central Africa. Therefore the Cuban troops remained in Angola. In spring of 1976 Agostinho Neto, the first president of post-colonial Angola, asked the Cuban government to extend its support, hitherto military, in the form of civil support on all political, administrative and social levels in order to reconstruct and to stabilize the country due to the massive brain drain of over 90% of the Portuguese population. The Cubans agreed again.⁷

The signing of an extensive “Framework Agreement on Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation”⁸ between the two states in July 1976 legalized the cooperation for civil reconstruction and created the institutional context for a further cooperation. The agreement was the decisive step to transform what was initially a politically and ideologically motivated internationalist solidarity into a long-term South-South cooperation, a socialist development aid project. Based on this agreement, in the following months several bilateral contracts, which defined specific programs of cooperation tailored to the needs of Angola, were established for various fields of cooperation.

Knowing that the provision of a large-scale and long-term engagement could only be provided with the unrestricted support of the Cuban population, Fidel Castro started his recruitment campaign and requested the Cuban people to fulfill their “revolutionary duty as civil and military internationalists”. He founded his arguments on the principles of internationalist solidarity, and derived anti-racist principles applying to all Cubans to defend the independence of Angola against attacks by the South African apartheid regime.⁹ Castro referred to the historical fact that more than one third of the Cuban people were descendants of Africans. He emphasized that of the 10 to 15 million Africans who are estimated to have reached America alive as a result of the transatlantic slave trade

7 For more details on this, see: Piero Gleijeses, *Misiones en conflicto: La Habana, Washington y África, 1959–1976*, Havana 2004, pp. VII-LV (foreword by Jorge Risquet Valdés) and p. 513ff; E. George, *The Cuban Intervention* (footnote 4), p. 105ff.

8 *Jornal de Angola*, 31 July 1976, p. 2; *Bohemia*, 32 (1976), p. 55f.

9 Fidel Castro, *Discursos*, v. 3, Havana 1979, p. 149.

between the 16th and the 19th century, almost one million came to Cuba. The prosperity of the island in the 19th century, based on sugar production for the world market, Castro argued, was essentially achieved by African slave labor. Between 1868 and 1898 most of the slaves or their descendants had joined the struggle for independence against the Spanish colonial empire as soldiers, and some as renowned military leaders. Those who joined the struggle for independence were on the one hand able to attain their individual freedom whereas on the other hand an independent Cuba held out the prospect of the general abolition of slavery and integration into a society that had defined itself as exclusively white.¹⁰ In 1886 abolition was achieved, but not integration into the post-emancipation society – although the experiences of war had brought about a variety of black-white alliances.¹¹

For Castro this extensive participation of slaves of African descent in Cuba's war of independence – and thus the implication of a “common” experience of war against colonialism – was a further justification for the moral duty of all Cubans, regardless of the color of their skin, to support the Angolan independence war as internationalists: Every Cuban had the obligation to pay Cuba's historic “debt towards humanity” by means of personal sacrifice.¹² This reference was underlined by calling the first military intervention in 1975/76 “Operation Carlota”, after an African slave who was the assumed leader of one of the most spectacular slave uprisings in Cuba in 1843. The famous Colombian novelist, Gabriel García Márquez, one of the closest supporters of the Cuban government, justified the Cuban military involvement in Angola for the international left by publishing an essay in the *New Left Review*, entitled “Operation Carlota”.¹³

3. Education Policy and Transfers of Knowledge

The leaders of the MPLA had incorporated educational reform into the constitution in November 1975, introducing a new inclusive educational system for the benefit of the whole Angolan population.¹⁴ Their aims were huge: the elimination of an illiteracy rate of about 85% of the population within a few years, the eradication of the heritage of colonialism, and the creation of “new men”.¹⁵ This new education program was an important break with the exclusive colonial educational system, where only whites and a few so-called “assimilated” blacks and mulattoes had the right to an education at all. Furthermore it offered a real chance for social and cultural advancement for many, and participation in it turned out to be very popular.

10 Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation and Revolution, 1868-1898*, Chapel Hill (N.C.)/London 1999.

11 Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912*, Chapel Hill (N.C.)/London 1995.

12 F. Castro, *Discursos* (footnote 9), p. 238.

13 Gabriel García Márquez, *Operacion Carlota: Los Cubanos en Angola; El Che Guevara en Africa; La Batalla contra el Reich Sudafricano: Textos del Sabueso Contemporaneo*, Lima 1977.

14 Angola 11 de Novembro de 1975: *Documentos da Independência*, Luanda 1975, p. 15.

15 MPLA, *Princípios de base para a reformulação do sistema de educação em ensino na R.P.A.*, Luanda 1978.

On the other hand the new concept did not aim at a progressive educational system in order to stimulate the self-consciousness and self-liberation of the Angolan people as designed for example by the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire¹⁶, who had developed the model of an “education for liberation” and had been one of the early educational advisers in Angola.¹⁷ Although Freire had many supporters in Angola, Angolan politicians and educationalists finally chose the system successfully implemented in Cuba. The Cuban system, which was ideologically much more closed, was considered to be more suitable for educating the masses according to the spirit and the political aims of the MPLA to build socialist society. Cuba had carried out a literacy campaign in 1960 and implemented a new educational system with the main objective of educating “new men” and integrating them in the revolutionary socialist project. This experience became the main source for inspiration for the Angolan education system. Another advantage was the willingness of the Cuban government to send specialists who could support the Angolan reform.

In the early phase of educational reform, the support of Cuban advisers in the Angolan Ministry of Education was essential. From 1978 on Cuban teachers who were involved in order to overcome the lack of local teachers played a fundamental part in realizing the educational reform at all levels of schooling and in higher education. The cooperation in education was therefore an important field of transfer of knowledge and experience from Cuba to Angola. Cuban advisers were the most important issue due to Angola’s lack of qualified persons in almost every sector. They were important for establishing the structure of the educational system and its administration as well as the creation of new curricula and textbooks, and the training of young teachers. Cuban know-how and experience were crucial at the beginning of the cooperation, when the advisers were active in every department of the Angolan Ministry of Education.

Nevertheless the deployment of Cuban advisers did not imply an automatic uni-directional adoption of Cuban models: A close reading of both the internal documents of the Angolan Ministry of Education revealing the conceptual discussions, and of additional interviews with Cuban and Angolan experts (e.g. former organizers of the cooperation) demonstrates that the post-colonial Angolan educational system was not a simple adoption of the Cuban system. It was rather the result of intensive (and often controversial) discussions between Cuban and Angolan specialists. In consequence, ultimately the Angolans decided about the structures, contents and methods they wanted to implement. It were the Angolan specialists who transformed these structures, contents and methods

16 Paulo Freire (1921–1997) conducted a literacy campaign in Brazil in 1947, in order to raise the consciousness of the poorest sectors of the Brazilian society and to mobilize them to fight for their rights. For this purpose he had developed a new, revolutionary literacy method – education for liberation – that conformed with the cultural characteristics of every local community and could be modified according to the respective vocabulary.

17 Interview Angola 2006, No. 7, Luanda, 27.01./17.03.2006 (Artur Pestana, “Pepetela”). Pepetela is one of the most important contemporary Angolan authors. He was Deputy Minister of Education between 1977 and 1981 and one of the architects of the post-colonial educational reform.

in accordance with the specific challenges of the country and of course in the interests of the MPLA government.¹⁸

All Cuban civil cooperants in Angola worked on behalf of the MPLA government, and despite being foreigners they represented the new power and the new political aims of constructing a socialist society and a culturally homogeneous nation state. In regions and provinces where the Angolan government had hardly any presence and where the political and military influence of its opponents was decisive, the ideologically trained and politically committed Cuban teachers were the “civilian outposts” of the MPLA government. Through their teaching, usually highly motivated and innovative, they represented in a positive sense the existence of a government and a state that actually carried out its promise of a progressive education policy. The use of Cuban teachers therefore not only served to implement the education reform but also to spread the new national project of the MPLA that aimed at the integration of the whole population.

This policy occasionally culminated in such paradoxical situations as Cuban teachers, despite their often inadequate knowledge of Portuguese, supporting the instructions of the MPLA about acceptance of Portuguese as the national language and its introduction in Angolan schools.¹⁹ They therefore acted in accordance with the MPLA’s policy of assimilation through linguistic homogenization. The Cuban teachers can thus be characterized as agents of the political, social and cultural change that represented the aims of the MPLA both as substance and symbol. As “representatives” of the MPLA government, they assisted in penetrating, controlling and administering the Angolan territory. Against the background of their own socialization in a nation state with a functioning infrastructure and administration, as well as a countrywide network of social services, their educational mission included support for the process of building state and nation in Angola, intensifying and stabilizing the rule of the MPLA.

Initially the Cuban government had supported the concept of empowerment by sending only advisers to the Angolan Ministry and instructors for the teacher training programs as well university professors to establish a system of higher education. Their aim was strict limitation of the numbers of civil cooperants. But finally the provision of thousands of Cuban teachers became the biggest contribution, because rapid training of a great number of new Angolan teachers proved to be impossible. The establishment of the new mass education system turned out to be so popular among Angolans that as early as summer 1977 the agreed cooperation programs were insufficient to cope with the num-

18 This estimation is founded on my intensive study of hundreds of original documents from the years between 1976 and 1991 from the archives of the Angolan Ministry of Education (Ministério da Educação, MED). In particular the intensive internal discussions documented there clearly indicate the constant efforts to drive forward the educational reform and to critically evaluate the results already reached.

19 The statement of principles of the new educational system (MPLA, *Princípios de base para a reformulação do sistema de educação em ensino na R.P.A.*, Luanda 1978) mentioned the linguistic and cultural diversity of Angola only in connection with the backwardness of the country. The various African ethnic groups of Angola, which are generally divided into the larger groups of the Bakongo, Mbundu, Ovimbundu, Lunda-Kioko, Nhaneka, Ambó, Ngangela and Herero, with their differing regional and local Bantu and Khoisan languages, were not taken account of in national education policy until the mid-1990s.

bers of newly registered pupils, which grew to over one million. The MPLA government therefore turned to the Cuban government once again, asking for more civil cooperants to perpetuate their eager social and educational programs, in order to maintain popular support in the polarized and ongoing war situation. This time Angola requested Cuba to send teachers for direct support in the classroom. The Cuban government again reacted positively to this request and sent brigades of hundreds of Cuban students, the *Destacamento Pedagógico Internacionalista "Che Guevara" (DPI)*,²⁰ to work as teachers in Angola, as well as several hundred more young teachers beginning in early 1978. That is why the initial empowerment concept was replaced by the massive deployment of Cuban teachers who stood in for non-existent Angolan teachers.

Another important component of the Cuban educational cooperation with Angola was the establishment of Angolan boarding schools on the Cuban "Isla de la Juventud" (Isle of Youth) funded in 1977, where several thousand Angolan children received (and still receive) a free primary and secondary school education. The best of them were sent to Cuban universities. Not only were students from Angola educated there (and still are); the Isla de la Juventud schooling program additionally included the establishment of national-based boarding schools for Asian, African and Latin American students from states friendly to Cuba.²¹ In the 1970s and 1980s, the aim of these boarding schools was to complement students' normal education and their participation in specified qualification programs with revolutionary education of students to transform them into revolutionary cadres. All boarding schools were nationally organized. Every "nation" had its own schools, lodging and educational programs. The challenge of this nationally organized education was to promote a common national identity between the students and through linguistic and cultural homogenization. With regard to the polarized war situation in Angola this was considered to be especially important.

The number of Cuban teachers in Angolan schools increased continually until the 1982-83 school year and reached its peak in mid-1982 with the presence of 2,000 educators per year. In 1982, Cubans made up almost 80% of all foreign teachers in Angola; the other 20% were mainly Portuguese, but also Soviet, Bulgarian, East German and Viet-

20 Between 1978 and 1986 a total of 2,026 Cuban trainee teachers, who were between 17 and 21 years old on average, were sent to Angola with these brigades, see Lidia Turner Martí et al., *Breve Historia de un destacamento*, Havana 1996, p. 30.

21 The social experiment on the Isle of Youth encompassed at times up to 34 national education centers for over 10,000 pupils and students. The program of scholarships continued after 1991 and still exists today. According to information supplied by the Cuban Ministry for Higher Education (MES), in the years to 2004 more than 40,000 students gained a school or higher educational qualification on the Isle of Youth and at other Cuban higher education institutions. According to this information 30,000 of them came from sub-Saharan Africa, and of these 8,000 from Angola. Not all figures on foreign participants in the programs can be accurately verified, but can be taken as guideline figures to show the scale of the program, see: Nancy Jiménez Rodríguez, *Mujeres sin fronteras*, Havana 2008; Ortega Vivino et al., *Estudiantes extranjeros en la Isla de la Juventud (1977-1996)*, Havana 2004 (unpublished manuscript), p. 8 ff.; see also: Hauke Dorsch, *Übergangsritus in Übersee? Zum Aufenthalt mosambikanischer Schüler und Studenten in Kuba*, in: *Afrika Spectrum* 43 (2008) 2, pp. 225-244, here p. 231.

namese.²² Most of the Cuban teachers worked in primary and middle schools.²³ Due to the language barrier between Spanish and Portuguese, they were assigned only from school year six, and not for teaching Portuguese but for mathematics, physics, biology, chemistry and history, subjects for which Angolan educationalists regarded the linguistic shortcomings of the Cubans as less serious. The teachers and lecturers were sent to Angola for one or two years. According to Cuban and Angolan statistics, more than 10,000 teachers and lecturers were active in Angola in the period 1976 to 1991 in primary and secondary education, as well as the Angolan universities.²⁴

For Cuban society, the large scale of the whole civil cooperation with Angola from 1977 on represented an enormous challenge, particularly as in many fields the specialists requested by Angola (especially teachers and doctors) were not available because of shortcomings in Cuba. The situation came to a head in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Cuban soldiers and civilian specialists also had to be available for large-scale internationalist programs in Ethiopia and Nicaragua. For this reason, many Cuban students were appointed as teachers in Angola to make up for the shortage of personnel.

How did this transatlantic Cuban-Angolan transfer of knowledge take place in the Angolan schools? The results of my research indicate that the personal commitment of the Cuban teachers played a fundamental part in achieving the aims of the Angolan educational reform. In particular, Cuban teachers were responsible for introducing and putting into practice new, modern and interactive methods of teaching and learning that had been developed and tested in Cuba since the 1960s. This practical work in the schools encompassed all elements of socialist instruction methods, including a variety of means to educate, to influence and to control the human will. These modern and interactive methods aimed to shape the students in correspondence with the socialist system. Therefore the objective of education was not only regarded as the imparting of knowledge but as an education towards integration into a socialist society. It was through such methods as the so-called monitor system, which meant special promotion of specially gifted pupils, employing them as supply teachers. These “monitors” were shining examples, obliged to support weaker students. The educational background of this method was to influ-

22 RPA, Secretaria do Estado da Cooperação, Comissão de avaliação da cooperação ao Cda. Ministro da Educação, Luanda, Circular No. 1/CACI/SEC/Maio de 1982, Assunto: Avaliação da cooperação, 2 pages [People's Republic of Angola, State Secretary of Cooperation, Commission of Evaluation of the Cooperation to Ministry of Education, Luanda, Circular, May 1982, Affair: Evaluation of Cooperation] (MED archive).

23 RPA, MED/GICI/GIL, Avaliação das cinco nacionalidades e categoria com a maior expressão, approx. 1985 [People's Republic of Angola, Ministry of Education, Dept. of International Cooperation, Evaluation of the five Nationalities and Categories with Major Expression] (MED archive).

24 See Angel García Pérez Castañeda, *El internacionalismo de Cuba en la colaboración Económica y Científico-Técnica: Esbozo histórico de un cuarto de siglo de la Revolución Socialista Cubana, 1963–1988*, Havana n.d. (unpublished manuscript), p. 242; N. Jiménez Rodríguez, *Mujeres sin fronteras* (footnote 21), p. 96. It is difficult to present exact data, as hardly any detailed information is available from Cuban authorities and the figures at my disposal were not always consistent. Nevertheless I had access to enough statistical material from both the Cuban and the Angolan side to be able to make relatively reliable statements. The available information makes it clear that the cooperation with Angola was the biggest civil operation in the history of Cuba until 1991, with cooperation in the field of education as the most important in quantitative terms.

ence the students in order to form leadership qualities. Another method implemented by the Cubans was the introduction of out-of-school learning through aptitude groups in which pupils were familiarized with future professions. Through this well-aimed promotion of interests and talents children were to be influenced in regard to their future professions and educated to work in a disciplined way.

The engagement of the Cuban teachers therefore did not end in the classrooms but was always extended to the organization of leisure activities (such as the aptitude groups) or an institutionalized homework supervision. It seems that owing to the huge involvement of Cuban teachers and their fierce determination to implement new teaching methods, the obsolete colonial methods (frontal teaching, learning by heart) were definitely superseded. From their individual perspective, the Cuban teachers even thought they had the task of “civilizing”. Though this was never mentioned directly in the interviews but could be derived from the description of their jobs. “Civilizing” in this teacher-student context meant education in virtues like punctuality, discipline, work enthusiasm, and “socialist virtues” such as a strong *esprit de corps* and personal sacrifice. They also educated their pupils in hygiene, a healthy diet and the need for regular medical care. And they tried to implement a new national consciousness expressed in the schools through the popular song “From Cabinda to Cunene”.²⁵ A direct transfer from Cuba was the implementation of the flag assembly and the singing of the new national anthem at the beginning of every school day.

According to the interviews with former Cuban teachers, contrasting them with those of the former Angolan pupils, out of all influences of the Cuban presence in the Angolan educational system, the new interactive teaching methods seem to have had the most extensive impact, despite their ideological background. Indeed, the Cuban instruction methods were also part of a general and global modernization of teaching methods, implemented in industrialized, western societies, too, during the 1970s, which implied a more “democratic” sense of the teacher-pupil relationship. With this practical application Cuban teachers seem to have promoted a kind of cultural revolution in the Angolan school system. All evidence I drew from my sources suggested that this modernization was the most enduring legacy of the Cubans within the Angolan educational system. But despite the approval the Cuban teachers got from their pupils, it was nevertheless an ambivalent task to carry through such crucial changes in everyday school life. The documents and the interviews revealed that this was a permanent and difficult process of negotiation with many setbacks, due to the fact that Angolan colleagues and school directors often refused to adopt the new methods. On the one hand, modern instruction methods signified much more work for notoriously badly paid teachers; on the other hand many of them were very skeptical towards the Cubans and refused to accept methods that came from “abroad”. And finally the popularity of the Cuban teachers provoked jealousy and inferiority complexes.

25 Cabinda is the most northern (extraterritorial) province of Angola, and Cunene is the most southern Angolan province.

4. Cubans and Angolans: Self- and Mutual Perceptions

The encounter of Angolans and Cubans seems also to have provoked ambiguous feelings and perceptions of the self and the other. I learned from the interviewees that generally Angolan pupils appreciated their Cuban teachers greatly because, due to the radical modernization of the instruction methods, their lessons were more suitable for children and much more interesting than those of the Angolan teachers who had still been trained within the colonial system. Former students told me that they even loved their Cuban teachers because they felt that these teachers cared for them much more than their Angolan teachers. They found the Cuban teachers less strict and their lessons more interesting. This was the consensual conclusion of my Angolan interviewees who were former students of Cuban teachers. As one of them stated: “The Cubans had at least educated one generation of Angolans.”²⁶ The former Angolan students also considered the language barrier between Spanish and Portuguese as less serious. It had merely led to rather comical situations in the classrooms which had been embarrassing for the Cuban teachers but not for the Angolan pupils.

Furthermore, the fact that Cuban teachers worked in rural areas where neither Angolan nor other foreign teachers wanted to live was received very well. A Catholic priest and physics teacher from the fiercely contested province Kuando Kubango in South-East Angola told me in an interview that he would not have been able to understand physics at all without his Cuban teachers and their convincing methods for explaining complicated mathematical operations. Additionally he appreciated very much the fact that they had come to his remote community at the cost of great privations.²⁷ Not all Angolan students were so enthusiastic about their Cuban teachers, but adopted a very pragmatic attitude towards them. After independence the Angolan educational system was severely under-developed, and schools and teachers were very scarce for those hundreds of thousands that took advantage of education reform and flocked to the classes now. Due to this situation they had to accept any teacher or not go to school at all.²⁸ Nevertheless, in retrospect all of the former students reflected clearly that the Cuban teachers had been agents in a policy to educate them in accordance with socialist rule.

And did they have a special relationship to their Cuban teachers because of the assumed “Latin American-African” relationship? None of my interviewees showed any such sentiment. And although in the Angolan vernacular the Cubans were sometimes affectionately called “cousins”, nobody showed a special affinity towards Cubans, except for those who were married to Cubans. According to another Angolan expression calling them the “good colonizers”, Cubans were considered predominantly as strangers even if the mutual relationship was good. For most of the Angolan students, the Cuban teachers were only a temporary episode in lives dominated by the turbulent events of indepen-

26 Interview Angola, 2006, No. 28 (O.), Luanda, 26 November 2006.

27 Interview Angola, 2006, No. 21 (P. S.), Luanda, 15 March 2006.

28 Interview Angola, 2006, No. 5 (B. P.), Luanda, 31 January 2006.

dence and the permanent war situation. Most of the former pupils admitted not having understood well why Cubans were teaching in their schools. Official Angolan propaganda claimed that the Cubans were friends and had come to help Angola. Some of the former students confessed that they had therefore perceived the Cubans as an important, powerful people. One interviewee illustrated it like this: Angolan pupils, unaware of the geographical realities, thought that Cuba was a huge, powerful, and developed country, able to provide teachers and schooling for Angolan pupils, since it was able to send so many people to Angola to fight against the South Africans and at the same time resist the power of the USA.²⁹

This corresponded with the self-perception of many of my Cuban interviewees, who gave me to understand that they felt culturally superior to the Angolans – even if they almost never expressed this directly. They never doubted that they were in the role of the teachers and Angolans were always the pupils, even if they were referring to a position as advisor in the ministry. A strong sense of mission and the conviction that they were fulfilling an important revolutionary task characterized their approach to their political and educational task in Angola. Some of them showed a paternalistic attitude towards their students and even towards their colleagues. By contrast their former Angolan colleagues stressed that they had always had a balanced and non-hierarchical relationship.

Referring to the claimed existence of a “Latin American-African nation” (and bearing in mind the concept of a “Black Atlantic”), I asked my Cuban interviewees whether this ostensible proposal was also a motive for going to Angola. The answers, however, represented a clear breach with the official discourse and could not have been more unambiguous: regardless of whether they had African ancestry or not, the majority of them stated that they had no special personal connection to Africa or Angola. This negative answer was even more vehement when the interviewees were Afro-Cuban. No-one wished to be identified with Africa and Angola. On the contrary, several interviewees clearly stated that the arguments for a “Latin American-African nation” were in their opinion pure political fantasy or a skilful propaganda trick of their government. Only very few admitted that the search for their own roots on the African continent was one of their motives for going to Angola.³⁰

The question relating to a “Latin American-African” identity rather brought to light a quite different result: most interviewees admitted that they had actually known nothing at all about Africa when they received the call to join the civil cooperation in Angola. Before they went to Angola, their image of Africa was of a very far-away and alien place. Judging by their answers, their view of Africa was limited to a very small number of stereotypes like “wilderness”, “people with a low level of culture”, “jungle” and “wild animals” such as lions, giraffes, snakes and even “cannibals” – and in many cases “Tarzan”

29 Interview Angola, 2006, No. 26, Luanda, 1 April 2010 (P.F.J.P.).

30 Cf. Interview Cuba 2004, No. 1, Havana, 18 October 2004 (G. M.); Interview Cuba 2004, No. 30, Santiago de Cuba, 19 November 2004 (G. R.); Interview Cuba 2005, No. 70, Santiago de Cuba, 11 January 2005 (R. M. B.).

was even given as the most immediate association with Africa.³¹ For many of them, the first real or perceived connection to Africa and Angola was the first state visit to Cuba by President Agostinho Neto of Angola in July 1976.

If the search for their own roots in Africa was not a significant motivation, what impression had the experience in Angola made on them? Had it led to stronger identification with Africa and Angola or even a new transnational “Latin American-African” identity? An unambiguous result that emerged from this question was a clear demarcation from Africa. After their return, most of them identified even more strongly with Cuba, and drew a clear line between themselves and the Angolans, whom they perceived as being socially and culturally “backward”. This result is largely congruent with the findings of other historical, sociological, anthropological and cultural studies concerned with transcultural encounters carried out in other contexts.³² According to these findings, descriptions and representations of oneself often arise only after being confronted with the “other”³³, and encountering difference seems to stimulate reflection about one’s own self and experience, which were previously taken for granted. For the Cuban participants that I interviewed, this encounter led to greater appreciation of what was perceived as their “own” culture, nation or society.

In the specific case of the cooperation with Angola, this is unsurprising for two reasons. The experience of violence in the war in Angola had a decisive influence on the everyday life of the civilians. Participants experienced a wide range of trauma, as well as excessive demands that arose from the work situation, resulting in cultural shock and reinforcing feelings of being alien. This made the social progress attained in Cuba after the revolution appear all the more beneficial. In the light of their experiences in Angola, the participants had good reason to show a much greater appreciation of positively viewed aspects of their own society which, in the opinion of my interviewees, were completely lacking in Angolan society in conditions of war and upheaval. They mentioned for example female emancipation, social justice, a high standard of education and comprehensive medical care. Moreover, the patriotism and consciousness of national unity they attributed to Cuban society seemed even more desirable than before as guarantors of peace and progress, in contrast to their perception of the situation in Angola, where society was seen to be ethnically and culturally fragmented.

The spatial, social and cultural separation of the Cuban civil cooperants from the Angolan population, too, seems to have been significant in their personal distance from what they experienced and perceived about Angola. Partly for security reasons, the Cuban

31 Many of my Cuban interviewees, even those with African ancestry, repeated these widely disseminated stereotypes of “Africa”.

32 For a survey of the state of research and the different approaches to researching intercultural communication, cultural transfers and perceptions of otherness, see: Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, *Interkulturelle Kommunikation: Interaktion, Fremdwahrnehmung, Kulturtransfer*, Stuttgart 2008; from a historical and non-European perspective, see also: Jörg Baberowski / Hartmut Kaelble et al. (eds.), *Selbstbilder und Fremdbilder: Repräsentationen sozialer Ordnungen im Wandel*, Frankfurt/M. 2008.

33 The „other“ refers to the postcolonial understanding and intercultural interpretation of what is perceived and categorized as foreign and unknown.

civilians spent the whole duration of their stay in what I refer to as “Cuban enclaves”, spaces that were largely isolated from the Angolan population. This was not just a matter of geographically separate residential complexes; these were socio-cultural spaces defined by the Cuban civil administration structure in Angola that corresponded to the political and social order dominant in Cuba. The resultant diverse mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion between Cubans and Angolans defined not only the status of the cooperants within Angolan society, but also their own perception of Angolan society, of the Angolans and of what was perceived to be “Angolan”. This continuous and carefully maintained deliberate separation between Cubans and Angolans encouraged misunderstandings and feelings of otherness. This seems to be another reason why the two sides largely remained strangers to each other during the sixteen years of this transatlantic cooperation. Demarcation from what was perceived as “Angola” or “Angolan” led to a new definition of the participants’ own identity as “Cubans” and to a stronger identification with the social and political achievements of the revolution:

When I arrived in Cuba, I saw them there in their country as Angolans, as Africans, but I felt much more Cuban, more content with my revolution, I was much happier to be here, [...] to find fulfillment here, because we are like that, we love our country.³⁴

This or similar responses were the answers of almost all my interviewees to the question of whether they had identified more with Angola or with the African continent after their return to Cuba as a consequence of their experiences there. The only exceptions to this demarcation seem to have been those Cubans who had decided to stay in Angola and to marry Angolans.

The special Latin American-African relationship between Cubans and Angolans repeatedly claimed in official propaganda was thus not real, and the Cuban-Angolan cooperation had not led to the emergence of a collective transatlantic “Latin American-African” identity. Therefore there are grounds for the assumption that a stronger identification of the Cuban participants with their Angolan counterparts was merely not desired by the government, but that its absence seems to have had the instructive side-effect of raising acceptance of the Cuban system through this experience of strong socio-cultural contrasts. Here my research demonstrates that a satisfactory and differentiated discussion of this question requires further empirical, social-scientific and anthropological investigation concerned with identity and phenomena of perception and belonging in contemporary Cuban society. The transnational and transatlantic experiences of hundreds of thousand of Cubans through internationalist solidarity cooperations like that in Angola most probably led to phenomena of social and cultural change, for example in the fields of religion and music, which possibly contributed to the construction of transatlantic identities. However, no profound examination has so far been carried out that is capable of permitting more specific conclusions on this subject.

34 Interview Cuba 2004, No. 24, Santiago de Cuba, 12 November 2004 (I. C. M.).

5. Conclusion

An assessment of the results of the Cuban-Angolan cooperation concerning transfers of knowledge and mutual perceptions is necessarily ambivalent. On the one hand the massive and energetic support of Cuban teachers and advisers made it possible to lay at least the foundations for a modern national education system in Angola. However, the power struggle and conflict over material and ideals that the MPLA and UNITA fought with undiminished severity after the withdrawal of the Cubans until 2002 was a considerable handicap to all educational activities after 1991. In the face of the renewed outbreak of civil war, which forced millions of Angolans to flee and claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands, the modest progress that had been achieved until then was largely cancelled out again. The formula used to express the achievements of the Cubans, emphasizing that they had at least educated a generation, leads to the conclusion that the generation (including the interviewee) educated by Cuban teachers are – in a broader sense – ruling the country at the moment: All former students interviewed by me were middle or upper class, working as businessmen, university teachers, priests or even politicians. The current Angolan government, still dominated by the MPLA, is considered one of the most corrupt in the world. The poverty rates of the Angolan population are high and the receipts of the country's rich resources of petrol, ore and diamonds are not employed to benefit the Angolan people.

And concerning the personal encounter between Cubans and Angolans, their self- and mutual perceptions, I discovered that the political definition of the "Latin American-African Nation", supposing a special mutual, transatlantic identification or solidarity between Cubans and Angolans, was not reflected at all in the interviews. Angolans – except for those who married Cubans – generally did not develop a closer identification with Cuba or Cubans. For the Cubans this encounter led even to a greater appreciation of what was seen as their "own" culture, nation or society, and the Angolan interviewees never even took into consideration a transatlantic identity.

The Cuban cooperation with Angola neither led to the establishment of a socialist society in Angola, nor was it successful in ending the internal armed conflict. However, the experiences of organizing a large-scale civilian aid cooperation, both personal and institutional, led to a professionalization and reorientation of all Cuban civil cooperations undertaken after 1991. From the 1990s on, Cuban civil missions were no longer guided by revolutionary and internationalist but merely by humanitarian aims. The professionalization especially proved its worth after 1990, when civilian aid cooperations by Cuban specialists in zones of crisis and catastrophe, now separated from ideological premises, became an important source of income for the Cuban state. After the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union, the financial and economic subsidies vital to the Cuban economy were terminated, precipitating a long-lasting economic crisis for Cuba from which the country is only slowly recovering. The opportunity for civil specialists to earn additional income through civil aid cooperations abroad was in addition an opportunity for many Cuban families to survive the crisis after 1990.

Civil aid missions operated by the Cuban government were, and continue to be, extremely successful thanks to their long experience and professional organization, originating from the experience in Angola. Their success is also based on the outstanding reputation the Cuban civil aid workers enjoy worldwide due to their wealth of experience, their professional qualifications and their demonstrated commitment. Despite a considerable deterioration of the Cuban-Angolan relationship after 1991, which was due to the withdrawal of Cuban troops and civil cooperants from Angola and the abandonment of the socialist aims of the Angolan government, this relationship has experienced a surprising renaissance since 2007. From 2007 on, the presence of Cuban civil cooperants in Angola increased considerably. In 2009 more than 2.000 Cuban specialists worked in education and health services in Angola.³⁵

Today there are again several thousand Cuban specialists working in Angola for the post-war reconstruction of the country. This renewed Cuban-Angolan relationship is now based on pragmatism and not on ideology, and would not have been possible without the cooperation between 1976 and 1991, regardless of the lack of immediate results. But in the long run, the cooperation with Cuba stabilized the power of the MPLA, who emerged victorious from the civil war after 1991 and has ruled now since 1975. My investigation demonstrated that this singular Cuban-Angolan cooperation within a transatlantic space of interaction turned out to be sustainable, because after more than two decades it was possible to recover the old transatlantic networks between the two governments in order to establish a new South-South relationship. And even for some of my Cuban interviewees, former teachers in Angola, it also turned out to be another opportunity to return to Angola after more than two decades to implement a literacy campaign once again.³⁶

35 Granma, 22.07.2009, p. 3.

36 I always tried to maintain contacts with my former interviewees and therefore I learned that some of them had returned as cooperants to Angola recently in order to fulfill newly established civil cooperation contracts between the two governments.