

Making Sense of War and Peacetime Angola: UNITA Ex-combatants Stories

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The Angolan civil war from 92 till its end in 2002 became something of a “new war” token in armed conflicts literature. UN peacebuilding, especially after the definite failure of the Lusaka agreement in 97, was increasingly grounded in such an international understanding of the conflict. With Savimbi elevated to the status of spoiler *par excellence*, the high publicity around the sanctions on the “conflict diamonds” financing UNITA’s war and, finally, the almost automatic advent of peace after his death in battle, UNITA rank-and-file have gone mostly invisible in the accounts of Angola’s war.

This paper explores the reasons ex-combatants offer as to why they fought alongside UNITA and how they make sense of a war in which they themselves participated. Another interrelated way through which UNITA rank-and-file have been made invisible is through the assumption their actions were determined by the dictatorial type of structure within the movement and thus nothing but the product of coercion and fear. Based on material from fieldwork among UNITA ex-combatants, the view of the war as a “war of elites”, where Savimbi’s character and personal ambition in particular figures prominently, clearly comes out as one of their stories on the conflict. At the same time, however, the paper argues many individuals, even if recognizing there was not much of an option for them, still conceive of their participation in the war as a contribution to a different political project in Angola. Slightly different from the grievances approach, attention is given to how suffering was converted into a category for political action when entering UNITA. Finally, because fieldwork was conducted in 2007, the paper explores these war stories as much about the past as about the present; as well as transnationally elicited ones. It was frequently on the basis of their evaluation of present day Angola, namely through contrast with UNITA’s wartime governance structures in education and health; as well as by rejoining the story the world told about Savimbi and the movement, they articulated their reasons for the struggle.