

State Building in War and Peace in Angola

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During the Angolan civil war the idea of state building and the imagining of the state were central to the legitimating discourses of the UNITA rebel movement as well as the MPLA government. This paper, based on interviews with political elites and with ordinary people who remember life on either or both sides of the Angolan conflict, examines the discourses and practices of state building employed on both sides during the war, and traces continuities between the war years and peacetime state building.

Far from representing a rebellion against an established state, the Angolan war was a case of the MPLA and UNITA competing with each other to be the sole occupiers of the physical and political space vacated by the departure of the Portuguese. Both movements claimed a prerogative of violence that they justified in terms of a state-like responsibility to maintain order and to promote development. The paper avoids making a categorical distinction between the MPLA and UNITA, and examines the degree to which they were able to use appeals to statehood in their attempts to legitimise themselves.

The MPLA's state building project remained a work in progress until the end of the war. The conflict both restricted the territorial extent of state building, and shaped its character through the imbrication of the civilian, military and political functions of the state. UNITA, even though it never achieved recognition in the international state system, expressed its own political legitimacy in terms of its capacity to behave in the manner of a state. Its state-like ambitions reached their highest realisation in its headquarters at Jamba, but even at its bush bases in central Angola UNITA defined its relationship with local populations through structures and discourses that resembled those of a state: an imagined state that was coterminous with UNITA as a political movement, and whose nature, like that of its adversary, was determined by the fact of war.

These discourses on state building as a partisan exercise have continued to shape the way in which state building is conducted and understood in peacetime. Recent state building efforts by the MPLA have been conditioned by narratives of post-war reconstruction. The expansion of the state is indistinguishable in official discourse from the consolidation of the MPLA's control over the national territory.