

Contesting Nationalisms in the Angolan Civil War

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Angola was not unique in producing competing discourses of anti-colonial liberation, but it was unusual in that no one discourse of nationalism became hegemonic among all Angolans for decades after independence. The civil war that lasted from 1975 until 2002 was not only an armed conflict over territory, but also an ideological conflict between the MPLA and UNITA over the meaning of the Angolan nation.

This paper draws on interviews with Angolans from a range of social classes and both urban and rural backgrounds who remember the years of war, including elites from both sides, as well as people who were drawn unwillingly into the conflict. I will examine the meanings that are assigned to national liberation in the discourses of the MPLA and UNITA and in the discourses of people who had a more or less close relationship with either or both political movements. I will consider how the idea of national liberation was normative in the discourses of both the MPLA and of UNITA: both used the idea of national liberation not only to legitimate their own power in the areas that they controlled by force and their use of violence to quell dissent, but also to denigrate the opposing movement as the representative of foreign interests.

The paper will move beyond these official discourses to look at people's accounts of their relationship with the rival movements: these ranged from active ideologically-driven participation in warfare and in political activity, to co-operation only as far as was necessary to ensure survival in the face of the demands made by whichever movement held military power. On this basis I will problematise the notion of political "support", showing how support manifested in the supplying of goods or the rendering of services to one or other political movement did not always imply an acceptance of that movement's narrative of national liberation. I will relate these different degrees of identification with liberation discourses to people's class position and their participation in an urban or a rural economy. I conclude that the discourses and practices of the MPLA and of UNITA had more in common with each other than is generally acknowledged. On each side, acceptance of a particular narrative of national liberation was a function of the military control by one or the other movement rather than a reflection of popular aspirations.