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Panel 65: Practices and discourses of emancipation in Southern African localities

**Paper: Contesting nationalisms in the Angolan civil war**

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If nationalism has been the dominant ideology that accompanied the end of colonialism and which underpinned the political legitimacy of new states and regimes, the idea of emancipation from the subjugation of the colonial era is never far below the surface of nationalist ideology. Angola is not unique in having witnessed the rise of several different conceptions of national liberation within its borders in the period before independence; nor is it unique in that these different conceptions were encouraged and shaped by rival political movements. Angola is unusual, however, in that no one strand of nationalism became dominant in the decades following independence: a fact that was inseparable from the reality that control of the Angolan population was divided between the MPLA state and the UNITA rebels from 1975 until 2002.

The 27 years of near-continuous war that followed Angolan independence served to entrench the contradictions between different strands of nationalism, as separate ideas about the nature and character of the Angolan nation, and about what constituted freedom and what constituted oppression, were propagated in the zones controlled respectively by the MPLA and UNITA. The military victory by the MPLA government in 2002, which has since been consolidated by the MPLA's overwhelming success in the 2008 parliamentary elections, provided an opportunity for the government to reinforce the position of its own version of nationalism. The purpose of this paper is to examine the content of the different versions of nationalist ideology propagated by the MPLA and by UNITA, and how each of them sought to set the limits on popular political discourse by defining emancipation in their own terms.

My interest in Angola goes back to the last year of the civil war, when I was working as a journalist there and interviewing people who had been forced into the towns by the government's counter-insurgency tactics. Many of them had spent most or all of their lives in areas controlled by UNITA. I found their narratives on politics, on the nation and their place within it were quite different from the corresponding narratives from people who had spent their lives in government areas. This was something more than a difference of political opinion – it was something more profound about people's sense of their own identities and their relationship to the nation. More recently, I have returned to Angola and investigated these questions at greater length. I should state at this point that my research has been in the Central Highlands of Angola, a region where the MPLA and UNITA were the main contenders for power. In this paper I will trace the nationalist discourses of the MPLA and UNITA from the period of anti-colonial mobilisation through the years of civil war.

In the introduction to a recent volume on Angola, Patrick Chabal notes that nationalism in Angola today is less important than the realities of incumbency:

The MPLA benefits today from the considerable advantages of having held power since independence, rather from any legitimacy attached to its success in having defeated its anti-colonial rivals.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to take issue with Chabal's assertion that power, and the associated ability to dispense patronage, are more important than nationalism (or indeed than any other ideology) in maintaining hegemony. In a country which, with the outbreak of civil war in 1975, was denied the post-independence euphoria that much of Africa enjoyed in the 1960s, and where many people over the age of fifty speak of "*o tempo colonial*" with some nostalgia, one would not expect narratives of the struggle against colonial oppression to be the most effective rallying-call. Yet, as I shall discuss later, this has not prevented the MPLA from continuing to invoke the independence struggle in support of its own legitimacy.

Nationalism as an ideology with its associated ideas of freedom has been prominent in Angolan political discourses from before independence and throughout the civil war. Most of the historical literature on Angola from the mid-20th century onwards identifies three main strands of nationalism, which gave rise to the three nationalist movements that sought liberation from Portuguese colonialism.<sup>2</sup> Briefly: the MPLA and FNLA both emerged in the early 1960s. The MPLA leadership came from the *assimilado* and *mestiço* populations of the coastal cities, including a strong element among Angolan students in Portugal. The FNLA organised among Bakongo exiles in the then Zaire. These two movements vied for the support of independent African states for recognition as the legitimate representative of the Angolan people. Later, Jonas Savimbi broke away from the FNLA, taking with him his constituents, whose origins were in the Central Highlands, to form UNITA.

The suppression of nationalist activity by the colonial authorities within Angola effectively ruled out whatever possibility of national consensus may otherwise have existed. Nevertheless, the late decolonisation of the Portuguese territories meant that by the time independence was in sight, the principle of independent states retaining their colonial boundaries was no longer a matter for debate: rather than looking for partition, all three anti-colonial movements laid claim to the mantle of Angolan nationhood. The precipitous departure of the colonial authorities, who bestowed independence on "the Angolan people" at a time when there was no consensus of who the representatives of the Angolan people were, created the conditions for the civil war that lasted until 2002.<sup>3</sup> The FNLA ceased to be a significant player following its military defeat on the outskirts of Luanda in November 1975 – the rest of this paper will look at the rival nationalist claims of the MPLA and UNITA.

The origins of Angolan nationalism are already well documented. In brief, the MPLA, the FNLA and UNITA were each the product of a regionally based elite, each of which had had a different kind of relationship with colonialism, and which lacked either the reason or the opportunity for mutual contact. The prohibition by the colonial authorities of any kind of anti-colonial activity ensured that nationalism

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<sup>1</sup> Chabal 2007:7.

<sup>2</sup> Heimer 1979, Guimarães 2001, Birmingham 2002, Chabal 2002, Péclard 2005, Messiant 2006, Pestana 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See Birmingham 2002.

remained an elite affair, much of its business conducted in exile, and prevented popular mobilisation. The coup d'état in Portugal in April 1974 suddenly led to political liberalisation in Angola and the prospect of independence. In January 1975, the three independence movements and the Portuguese government signed the Alvor Accord, which provided for a transitional power-sharing government, a gradual withdrawal of Portuguese security forces and their replacement by a unified national army, and eventual elections.

To discover why none of this came to fruition, the events that took place in Angola in the second half of 1975 are worth close attention. After the coup of April 1974, Angolans were briefly able to make political choices – though even then it was only within the towns that any of the movements attempted to recruit followers. One former civil servant and MPLA loyalist explained her political choice as follows:

I sympathised more with the MPLA because it helped me to shape my ideas. I felt there was more progress, more development, in the MPLA's vision – a more progressive vision, not that emphasis on culture [that UNITA displayed].<sup>4</sup>

Members of UNITA's rank and file also sometimes spoke in a way that suggested there had been an ideological element to UNITA's recruitment in 1974. A man who later reached the rank of lieutenant recalled:

I came to know the movements in 1974 – I was a student at the time. I joined UNITA [aged 16] – it was the movement that would free the Angolan people – I joined as a soldier. We wanted to free the people from the claws of Portuguese colonialism. There were three parties, each with its ideology. There was war because one party did not want elections.<sup>5</sup>

Many other UNITA supporters, however, seem to have been attracted above all by the fact that UNITA's leaders tended to be from that region, the Central Highlands. And those with a less strong party affiliation were more sceptical about the content of political discourse.

After this period of free political campaigning in the towns, it was in Luanda that the rivalry of the political elites first became popularised and found an expression on the streets. Around 8 August 1975, UNITA's leaders left Luanda for Huambo, apparently fearful of attacks by the MPLA youth militia. In the weeks that followed, tens of thousands more people left Luanda: some of them were followers of UNITA, but many more had been threatened simply because they were from the Central Highlands, the part of the country that was associated with UNITA. Soon afterwards, people from Luanda who had been living in the Central Highlands suffered similar threats, and a correspondingly violent exodus took place in a northerly direction. By September, the three liberation movements had established zones of exclusive influence, and put an end to free political activity. At the same time, the Portuguese state was withdrawing both its security forces and its bureaucracy. In Luanda, the MPLA took over the state media, while its army, the FAPLA, assumed a monopoly

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<sup>4</sup> Interview, Huambo, August 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Interview, Huambo, July 2008.

on violence. In Huambo, thousands of Portuguese civilians heading back to the motherland boarded planes at an airport that was under the control of UNITA – all this some months before Portuguese sovereignty officially ended. In other words, Angola had been territorially divided, and rival political movements had begun rival processes of state building, by the time the country became legally independent.

This fact has far reaching implications for how we conceive of the politics of the Angolan civil war. So much of the existing literature on civil war in Africa assumes discrete categories of “state” and “rebels”, the implication being that the unchallenged rule by a state is normative, and that a rebel movement is something that emerges as a challenge to the authority of the state. The reality of Angolan decolonisation meant that the discourses of nationalism that had been produced by the anti-colonial struggle were perpetuated by the MPLA and by UNITA after independence, when they came to deploy these discourses not against the Portuguese, but against each other. Each party’s version of nationalism served to constitute a notion of the Angolan people with the party at its centre, and to represent the opposing party as the agent of foreign interests.

These discourses of nationalist legitimacy were supported by more or less successful attempts at state building. These state building projects were not equivalent: the MPLA always had an advantage, through having taken hold of the internationally recognised state and inherited most of the colonial infrastructure. I have been influenced here by the suggestion that Philip Abrams made in 1977, in the midst of debates about the usefulness of studying the state – he proposed “that we should abandon the state as a material object of study... while continuing to take the idea of the state very seriously”.<sup>6</sup> Later theorists have come to use the concept of “stateness” to refer to the historical and contingent construction of the idea of the state, a process which is neither definitive nor complete. Crucially for our purposes here, stateness is not the exclusive prerogative of recognised states, but may be invoked also in an aspiration to statehood. The ideology of nationalism in independent Africa has been inseparable from the process of the creation of states and the creation of national identities defined in terms of these states. What my interviews with people who spent many years with UNITA have revealed is that UNITA produced a nationalist discourse in which the idea of the state was just as important as it had been for those anti-colonial movements all over the continent which, unlike UNITA, ended up in government. So in this paper I consider the nationalism of both sides in the Angolan civil war, and how they were related to projects of state building.

I start with the MPLA, which in February 1976 expelled UNITA from the cities of the Central Highlands. With military and later technical assistance from Cuba, the MPLA started to build a state, which for much of the war barely extended beyond the limits of the main towns. Alongside the building of institutions, a process of politicisation was crucial, particularly so in a region that had become associated with UNITA. The education system and civilian structures linked to the party such as the women’s organisation, the youth organisation and the children’s organisation sought to create opportunities for participation in party activities. Citizenship was, thus, intimately tied to party affiliation, and the mass organisations served a central role in political education.

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<sup>6</sup> Abrams 2006:122.

How, then, did the MPLA seek to legitimate itself? Important to the process of projecting itself as the only authentic representative of the Angolan people were the MPLA's narratives that put it as the originator of the liberation struggle. These were passed on through a systematic programme of political and ideological education that accompanied the MPLA's programme of state building. Marcum argues that during 1976, while UNITA fell apart politically as a result of being on the defensive militarily, the MPLA "drew strength from its longstanding commitment to ideologically grounded political education and mobilization".<sup>7</sup> The political education that the party presented included ideas about state and party and the relationship of both with people; interpretations of the historical role of the MPLA; the reasons that were presented for the war; and how the fact of the war shaped the discourses presented by the MPLA.

The MPLA adopted a modernising discourse which sought to erase ethnic and regional difference and which positioned the MPLA as the sole representative of the Angolan people. The party's discourse conceived as freedom not only in terms of the freedom of the Angolan people from Portuguese colonialism, but in terms of an international anti-imperialist struggle. The following account by a party loyalist gives an idea of the MPLA's own preferred version of its function in society.

[The role of the party in daily life] was to mobilise people for work, because at that time it was called the MPLA-PT (Workers' Party). It was known that without work the party would not go forward. Mobilise the country for work and to study, because studying was a revolutionary duty, and mobilising the country for the defence of the country because at that time we didn't only have the problem of UNITA, but also the problem of external enemies. You know we had the problems with South Africa, with Zaire, which attacked us. It was necessary to mobilise the people in such a way that they would be aware of the political-military situation that the country was experiencing. Aside from education, work, health it was necessary to mobilise the people to guarantee the security of our territorial integrity. Mobilise the youth to join the armed forces to guarantee territorial integrity. That was the great role of the party.<sup>8</sup>

MPLA propaganda after independence presented the party's role in the anti-colonial struggle and emphasised the external nature of the current enemy that the MPLA was confronting. MPLA historiography claims the prison break of 4 February 1961 as "the day on which the Angolan people, under the leadership of the MPLA, took the initiative in rising against Portuguese rule, opened up a strategic challenge to the colonial system" not, as some historians have later asserted, an initiative by "ill-equipped hotheads" that was claimed only retrospectively by the MPLA.<sup>9</sup>

In the youth organisations, a figure called Ngangula featured in political education: a young boy who had supposedly been captured by the Portuguese and been killed

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<sup>7</sup> Marcum 1978:278.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Huambo, May 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Andrade and Ollivier 1975:119; Birmingham 1992:36. See also Guimarães 1998:44-45.

when he refused to reveal where the guerrillas were hiding. According to a priest who had been a child in the 1980s:

Now that I know, I'd say he was a fictional character, just so that children would have a model, a fictional character, so that we couldn't do anything without reference to him. They had to create this image – this reference for childhood patriotism.<sup>10</sup>

As well as creating anti-colonial martyrs, the MPLA's political education emphasised the external nature of the current enemy that the MPLA was confronting. Anselmo, who was born in the late 1960s, spent the first years of his life in an area that was contested between UNITA and the government, before moving to the city with his parents in order for him to go to school, and for his parents to resume the teaching careers that they had begun in colonial times. He recalled the late 1970s and 1980s as follows:

It was a time of great investment in ideology, particularly in education. I was a member of the Pioneers, then the students' association, and then the JMPLA. I helped organise rallies. The education system functioned – but in terms of transmitting the ideas of the dominant power. We were most affected by the war after 1983, when there were attacks [by UNITA] on Huambo city. [...] There was an internal reaction against counter-revolutionaries, people suspected of working for UNITA. There was a lot of talk of South Africa, of Ronald Reagan and the Clark Amendment.<sup>11</sup>

Accounts favouring the MPLA tend to emphasise UNITA's collaboration with the colonial authorities against the MPLA during one phase of the independence war, and to position UNITA as essentially a creation of the United States and South Africa. By casting UNITA as the agent of foreign forces, the MPLA discourse fixed the party's own role as the defender of the nation and served to conflate the interests of people, nation, state and party. Moco sees UNITA's foreign links and collaboration with the colonial army during the independence war as one of the most important elements in the MPLA's discourses of legitimisation.

It was, let's say, the great pretext to battle UNITA without respite: UNITA having allied itself with South Africa, and also there were precedents of UNITA having collaborated with colonialism. The story that the MPLA told, and with considerable evidence [...] was that Savimbi lived inside Angola under the cover of the Portuguese colonialists who helped him create a movement to impede the advance of the other movements, particularly the MPLA.<sup>12</sup> [...] When UNITA allied itself with South Africa, which at that time was hated for its policy of apartheid, it was a mobilising factor to say that UNITA was not worthy of being a liberation movement, but was a movement

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<sup>10</sup> Interview, Kuito, August 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Interviewee, Huambo, September 2008. The 1976 Clark Amendment to the United States Arms Export Control Act, banning US assistance to non-state armed groups in other countries, was repealed under the Reagan administration.

<sup>12</sup> A reference to Operação Madeira, in which Savimbi agreed to co-operate with Portugal against the MPLA. For further details see Minter 1988.

that, first, helped to prolong colonialism, and second, tried to help apartheid, racism, and tried to destroy Angola to help foreign interests.<sup>13</sup>

War itself was an essential element in the MPLA's strategies of legitimation: this is most clearly evident in Anselmo's recollection that an increase in UNITA attacks provided an opportunity for the government to brand its opponents as being connected to UNITA and to its foreign backers. This reached its most extreme expression in the words of an Angolan government official – a man who had been imprisoned and tortured during UNITA's occupation of Huambo in 1992, who denied that there had ever been a civil war in Angola: in his reading, the MPLA had simply been doing battle against an external enemy from 1975 until the end of the war. Supporters of the MPLA spoke of the party itself as having a defensive role, in a way that seemed to conflate the functions of party and military: "In 1980, when UNITA intensified the guerrilla war, it was the task of the party to defend the city: to create a system to protect its leaders."<sup>14</sup>

What of UNITA's nationalist discourses? It is well known that on the same night that Agostinho Neto declared independence in Luanda, Jonas Savimbi declared independence in Huambo: this was no secessionist movement, but represented an aspiration to control the whole of Angola. Savimbi's speech on that occasion sought to cast doubt on the MPLA's authenticity as Angolan by stating that "Portugal wished to decolonise by leaving us here with its godchild named Agostinho Neto". He nevertheless expressed willingness to contest elections with the MPLA as soon as it "decides to consider other liberation movements as patriots". He also emphasised the MPLA's Soviet links as evidence of the movement's non-Angolan nature: 'While the MPLA goes on thinking that only through Russian arms can they offer an ideology, we will say "no" and we will continue to fight.'

UNITA occupied the cities of the Central Highlands for a mere three months before MPLA forces expelled them, and Savimbi and his followers retreated to bases scattered through rural Angola. A few years later, they founded Jamba, the bush capital in the far south-east of Angola. This project was made possible, and its location was determined, by renewed support from South Africa, this time in the form of technical and financial assistance rather than a large-scale South African military presence. The south eastern corner of the country became known to UNITA as "the consolidated lands", defined by the area that was beyond the range of government planes.<sup>15</sup>

Even if UNITA's maintenance of a presence relied ultimately on its access to means of violent coercion, there was a strong ideological element in its relationship with the people who lived in the UNITA-dominated areas. Most of these people had not known the political control of any movement other than UNITA. Understanding the discourse of people who had lived in UNITA-controlled areas and who fulfilled various functions in the society over which the rebel movement ruled helps us to understand the relationship between the UNITA leadership and the people who lived

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Moco, Huambo, August 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Interviewee 150, Caála, August 2009.

<sup>15</sup> I deal in a separate paper at this conference (panel 45) with the state building aspects of UNITA's strategies at Jamba.

under its control. People who remember life at UNITA's the military bases or at its bush capital, Jamba, recall the importance of political education. This was sometimes formal, in schools and through public rallies – sometimes simply a matter of UNITA's ideologues succeeding in shaping the perceptions of people who lived in areas influenced by UNITA.

A former UNITA lieutenant recalled that the officials at the UNITA bases included “political experts tasked with organising the people to understand the guerrilla war”.<sup>16</sup> An important part of this meant promoting a perception of fear and threat, so as to convince people that they needed UNITA as a defender.

When we were in the bush, the villages were dispersed. If FAPLA was coming from one side, the people could leave on the other side. The people had places to which they could flee. FAPLA would try to infiltrate and capture people. The (UNITA) troops came from the base to instruct the people: FAPLA's coming, you must leave. When the enemy was coming, they always said we must go, to escape the bullets.<sup>17</sup>

But the discourses that UNITA deployed to secure people's support went well beyond simply cultivating fear of the enemy. There was an ideological aspect to this too: UNITA offered a preferred reading of history that emphasised its anti-colonial role and supported its claims to represent the interests of the majority of Angolans. I quote a former UNITA soldier:

The leaders explained in such a way that the people would accept to stay in the bush. ... They said they were fighting to liberate the black people of Angola with a different politics.<sup>18</sup> Angola has resources that need to be shared – this is what UNITA said. The people accepted this, and this is why they agreed to stay in the bush, because they believed that one day UNITA would be in power.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of Angola being a resource-rich land that had been plundered by an elite associated with the MPLA is a theme that runs through UNITA's discourses from the days of the civil war until the present. During the war years, this theme was supported

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<sup>16</sup> Interviewee 72, Caála, July 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Interviewee 61, Caála, June 2008.

<sup>18</sup> *Política* can mean “politics” but also “policy”.

<sup>19</sup> Interviewee 60. The unequal distribution of the benefits from Angola's natural resources is a theme upon which UNITA officials have become particularly vocal since the end of the civil war, which have coincided with increased foreign investment in the Angolan oil industry and a soaring global oil price between 2003 and 2007. Scepticism is therefore necessary towards interviews conducted in 2008 with UNITA activists who suggest that resource distribution was always part of UNITA's programme; it is very likely that we can see some attempts here to claim a retrospective legitimacy for UNITA's activity over the decades by asserting a continuity in the movement's doctrine from the 1970s until the present. On the other hand, Bridgland's (1986:313) description of a UNITA theatrical propaganda show, discussed later in this paper, that suggests that the looting of Angola's natural resources by foreigners in collaboration with the MPLA was part of the movement's discourse as early as 1981.



by a reading of history that emphasised UNITA's anti-colonial role and its claims to represent the interests of the majority of Angolans. The following two extracts are, respectively, a former UNITA "village organiser" – a man selected by UNITA to be the political liaison between his village and the nearby UNITA base – and from a former soldier. They illustrate two key themes in UNITA's political narratives: first, that Angola's natural resources were a national patrimony that UNITA sought to distribute fairly, and, second, that UNITA stood for a participatory democracy.

The leaders explained in such a way that the people would accept to stay in the bush. It was necessary to nourish the word of the party.<sup>20</sup> They said they were fighting to liberate the black people of Angola with a different politics.<sup>21</sup> Angola has resources that need to be shared – this is what UNITA said. The money that belongs to the majority can't be kept by the minority. The people accepted this, and this is why they agreed to stay in the bush, because they believed that one day UNITA would be in power.<sup>22</sup>

The former soldier recalled of his days the UNITA bases:

We had civic education. We learnt about the history of Angola: the arrival of the Portuguese, the enslavement of the people. In 1975 the MPLA refused elections because UNITA had the advantage over the MPLA. Agostinho Neto wasn't confident that he would win, and because UNITA always wanted democracy, Neto went to get the Cubans to chase the people out of the city and into the bush. UNITA went to the bush so as to have another strategy to struggle for democracy.<sup>23</sup>

This is a partial telling of Angola's history that is nevertheless typical of the historical narratives presented by UNITA's most loyal supporters. First, it erases the fact of UNITA's co-operation with Portugal in Operação Madeira, a detail of UNITA's history that the MPLA was, understandably, always keen to emphasise. Second, it offers an exaggerated role of UNITA's actions against the colonial state. According to Marcum, UNITA's military efforts before independence were directed less against the Portuguese and more against the MPLA. UNITA's attacks on state facilities were confined mostly to the sabotage of the Benguela Railway.<sup>24</sup>

In the early 1980s, UNITA established its bush capital at Jamba in the furthest south-eastern reaches of Angola: a location chosen for its remoteness from the MPLA's centre of power in Luanda, and for its proximity to supply lines from South African-occupied Namibia. It was at Jamba that UNITA came closest to realising its aspirations as an alternative Angolan state, and its unchallenged control of the location and relatively sophisticated infrastructure ensured that that it was in Jamba that UNITA was able to make its most assiduous efforts at political education. As was the case in the villages, schooling in Jamba promoted narratives that posited UNITA as the representative of Angolan national aspirations. These emphasised UNITA's

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<sup>20</sup> *Alimentar a palavra do partido.*

<sup>21</sup> *Política* can mean "politics" but also "policy".

<sup>22</sup> Interviewee 60, Caála, June 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Interviewee 64, Caála, June 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Marcum 1978:191-197, 211.

role in liberating Angola from colonialism, and sought to legitimise UNITA's continuing war against the MPLA by positing the MPLA as the agent of foreign interests.

[At Jamba] I learnt about what was needed for the well being of the country. About international history and the history of my country. That our country has wealth but the wealth is not helping everyone, only a minority.<sup>25</sup>

The political content of schooling appeared to promote the idea of statehood, and the idea that UNITA was a democracy. Again, this was part of a discourse that positioned UNITA as a better alternative to the incumbent MPLA government whose rule had never been experienced by most of the children in Jamba.

We had a basic idea that there was a government, but that UNITA was a state within a state. We had political education, which was part of the school programme. We learnt about economics, about rights, equality and citizenship. [...]

The MPLA had the wrong priorities – it was a machine, a prepared structure. That they chased UNITA people away and said that UNITA killed – but we wanted democracy.<sup>26</sup>

Public events in the *terra consolidada* – UNITA's secure zone surrounding Jamba – provided further opportunities for political education. Bridgland describes a play performed at a parade at Mavinga in 1981:

On the big, open parade ground Leonid Brezhnev, Fidel Castro and Agostinho Neto greeted each other in exaggerated fashion as *companeros* (brothers) before driving a devil's bargain. Brezhnev and Castro would send arms and men to Angola to drive out the UNITA *fantoques*. Neto would give them the country's diamonds, oil, coffee and fish in payment. In the next act Cuban soldiers arrived and began killing Angolan peasants – giving the soldiers full scope to display their acting talents – while in the forest UNITA was recruiting and training guerrillas. Finally, UNITA attacked and Brezhnev and Castro were driven from Angola.<sup>27</sup>

Once again, the message is that of UNITA as a nationalist movement defending Angola and its patrimony against an MPLA that was the agent of hostile foreign interests.

Comparing the nationalist discourses promoted by the MPLA and by UNITA in the separate zones that they came to control during the civil war, we may observe a certain degree of symmetry. Each party sought legitimacy through promoting narratives about its own history, which was one of anti-colonial struggle, and about the origins of its enemy, which was cast as the puppet of foreign invaders. Each side in this way attempted to constitute a version of the Angolan nation, with the political

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<sup>25</sup> Interviewee 75, Caála, June 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Interviewee 65, Caála, July 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Bridgland 1986:313. *Fantoques* means "puppets": a derisive term used by the MPLA for UNITA.

movement itself as the core of the nation. Each movement needed the existence of the other in order to sustain its own legitimacy. Just as the MPLA positioned itself as the liberator of the Angolan nation from the grip of imperialism and its proxy, UNITA, so UNITA portrayed itself as the movement that would free the Angolan people from the predations of the atheist Cubans and Soviets who worked through their proxy, the MPLA.

What, then has become of these contradictory ideas about freedom and political legitimization in post-war Angola? Christine Messiant suggests that there exists in Angola a new sort of nationalism centred on the MPLA:

[The] ideological vacuum is filled with talk of 'sovereignty regained', a nationalist discourse that is primarily geared to reject outside interference with the current political 'transition'. The emphasis on unity and reconciliation ... is ... meant to call all groups to rally behind the banner of the MPLA, still today conceived as synonymous with the Angolan nation.<sup>28</sup>

As Messiant notes, this new discourse with its emphasis on the government and / or the MPLA as the creators of peace may be "primarily geared to reject outside interference with the current political 'transition'"; in this respect, however, it is interesting to note the continuities with the MPLA's wartime discourses which, as noted earlier, sought to delegitimise its main nationalist rival, UNITA, by emphasising UNITA's foreign links. In the context of the "new" post-war nationalism, the twentieth anniversary of the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale, in 2008, provided an opportunity for the MPLA to reassert its claim as the defender of the Angolan nation, by reviving memories of a time when it was at war not only with South Africa, but with UNITA. As the weekly paper *Seminário Angolense* noted: "The battle of Cuito Cuanavale took place 20 years ago, but the battle for Cuito Cuanavale looks as though it's still to come."<sup>29</sup> The symbolism of the commemorative events betrayed a confusion – usefully so, from the MPLA's perspective – between the roles of party and state. MPLA flags were prominently displayed, while President dos Santos declared:

The battle, won by Angolan forces, gave rise to profound changes in Southern Africa, namely the application of UN Security Council Resolution 435/78, thus opening new perspectives for the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa and the independence of Namibia.<sup>30</sup>

Dos Santos's emphasis on the Angolan forces both cast the MPLA's victory as a victory for Angola, and played down the decisive role of Cuban forces in the outcome of the battle.

Later in 2008, during the parliamentary election campaign, the MPLA appeared sufficiently confident in its claim to be Angola's sole liberation movement that it

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<sup>28</sup> Messiant 2007:120.

<sup>29</sup> *Seminário Angolense*, year 4, edition 256, 15 March 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in *Seminário Angolense*, year 4, edition 256, 15 March 2008. The article also quoted UNITA's secretary general, Kamalata Numa, as taking exception to Dos Santos's version of events.

could evoke its role in the independence struggle in its efforts to win votes. At an MPLA rally in Uige on 1 September 2008, President dos Santos declared: “It was the MPLA who said in 1956 that we must struggle against colonialism. “Who won independence?” the president asked rhetorically. “The MPLA!” roared the crowd in response.<sup>31</sup>

More recently, President dos Santos has again returned to narratives of national liberation in an attempt to head off new challenges in the form of popular protest inspired by events in north Africa. Addressing the MPLA’s Central Committee in April 2011, Dos Santos contrasted what he portrayed as the authentically indigenous movements against colonial oppression with the criticism, muted as it may be, of today’s government.

When we were young, in the time of colonialism, we knew that the struggle for people’s emancipation was conducted through trade union movements, political parties or national liberation movements [...]

By contrast, according to Dos Santos, today’s critics not only lack popular support – they are in fact part of a neo-colonial conspiracy. Dos Santos alluded to

plans to put puppets in power, who would obey the will of foreign powers who want to return to plunder our riches and send us back to the misery from which we have liberated ourselves through much sacrifice.<sup>32</sup>

But if ideas of national freedom are once again being politicised on the side of the MPLA, there is little evidence that UNITA is managing to turn ideas of emancipation to its own advantage. Does UNITA still attempt to lay claim to a history as a liberation movement? The answer to this question will vary depending on whether one is talking about UNITA’s leadership, or its rank and file members. Many of the former UNITA followers whom I interviewed in 2008 justify their continued adherence to UNITA both on the basis that they had originally joined the movement in order to defend Angola against a Cuban invasion, and to defend themselves against an MPLA leadership that did not have their interests at heart.

From the side of the elites associated with UNITA, however, the claims to nationalist authenticity are more muted. Let us consider the address made by the UNITA member of parliament Jaka Jamba at a conference held in Huambo in 2003, supposedly with the aim of addressing the subject of Angolan identity.<sup>33</sup> Jamba, admittedly, was not speaking in his UNITA capacity on this occasion, and the word “UNITA” did not appear once in his address. The narrative that he presented can be summarised as follows: In colonial times, Angolan identities were suppressed by the imposition of “portugalidade” (Portugueseness) and assimilation. During the

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<sup>31</sup> Broadcast on Televisão Pública de Angola, “Jornal de Noite”, 2 September 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Angop 15 April 2011. “Discurso do Presidente José Eduardo dos Santos na reunião do Comité Central” [http://www.portalangop.co.ao/motix/pt\\_pt/noticias/politica/2011/3/15/Discurso-Presidente-Jose-Eduardo-dos-Santos-reuniao-Comite-Central,e545cbc5-1a17-43e7-a00a-f7f3d1f3dbd4.html](http://www.portalangop.co.ao/motix/pt_pt/noticias/politica/2011/3/15/Discurso-Presidente-Jose-Eduardo-dos-Santos-reuniao-Comite-Central,e545cbc5-1a17-43e7-a00a-f7f3d1f3dbd4.html) accessed 24 May 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Conference paper delivered in Huambo, September 2003.

liberation struggle, the guerrillas – whom Jamba does not name – adopted Mao’s “fish in water” approach. The anti-colonial struggle “presented to the freedom fighters the challenge of launching the bases of building a new nation from cultural, ethnic, linguistic, racial and religious diversity”. Jamba contrasts this with the period of one-party rule when “political and philosophical life was dominated by Marxist-Leninist ideology, the objective being the emergence of the ‘new man’”. Again, Jamba does not name the Marxist-Leninist party to which he refers – but we don’t need to know too much about Jamba’s own politics in order to be able to read between the lines here. The unnamed guerrillas can only be UNITA since they are set up in opposition both to colonial rule and to the one-party system that succeeded it: these two sets of oppositions imply, respectively, a nationalist history and a liberal democratic history for the movement.

Even more obtuse than Jaka Jamba’s talk is the address by UNITA’s leader, Isaias Samakuva, on 11 November 2007, the 32nd anniversary of Angolan independence. Independence day in any post-colonial country is one of those incontrovertible national symbols that any political party needs to claim as its own if it is to present itself as a unifying force. Yet, in Angola, 11 November 1975 was not only independence day, but also the day that pitched UNITA and the MPLA headlong into war. Samakuva portrayed it as follows:

About 32 years ago, Angola began a period of serious legal and political disruption that shook the unity of the nation, subverted the role of the state and promoted bad governance. This period is coming to an end.<sup>34</sup>

The picture that Samakuva paints is one of situation without agency. Neither UNITA nor the MPLA plays a role in the “period of disruption”. Instead, Samakuva spoke of Angolans calling for change, and went on to present a lengthy manifesto that promised an Angola with properly functioning health and education services.

Why has the UNITA leadership appeared reluctant to assert its old nationalist appeals? UNITA, I would suggest, is trapped in the contradictions between its past and its present. In 2002, it accepted a role as an opposition party in a nominally multiparty system that is nevertheless dominated overwhelmingly by the MPLA. De jure multipartyism is important to the MPLA’s claims to national and international legitimacy. For UNITA, it is difficult to reconcile its role as a subordinate loyal opposition party with claims to a nationalist history that brought UNITA into head-to-head conflict with the MPLA: hence the circumlocutions seen in the speeches I have quoted by Jamba and Samakuva.

All this means that at least within the realm of formal politics, the MPLA is seldom challenged either on its unspoken claims to be the sole nationalist movement in Angola, or on the specific content of the nationalism that is implicit in the MPLA’s political discourse. Echoes of the wartime discourse that cast UNITA as a terrorist force were heard in the months preceding the 2008 elections, as the reconciliatory

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<sup>34</sup> “Carta do Presidente Samakuva aos Quadros da Nação”, delivered 11 November 2007. Downloaded from [http://www.kwacha.net/samakuva\\_huambo.htm](http://www.kwacha.net/samakuva_huambo.htm) in November 2007; this website was no longer functioning at the time when this paper was being finalised.

tone adopted by the MPLA at the time of the 2002 peace agreement disappeared amid attempts to remind the electorate of UNITA's violent history, while portraying itself as reconciliatory and liberator.<sup>35</sup> In the 2008 election, the MPLA's massive victory in the former UNITA heartlands of the Central Highlands suggests that the MPLA's efforts in portraying itself as the bringer of peace and claiming credit for post-war reconstruction easily trumped the claims of authenticity upon which UNITA had gained a majority in the region in the 1992 election.<sup>36</sup> UNITA in 2008 appears to have retained the support only of its most loyal followers: those UNITA soldiers and their families who remained with the movement until its disarmament in 2002. The sentiments of exclusion voiced by these rump UNITA supporters in the provinces seldom find voice at the level of national politics.

If we can discern any challenges to the dominance of the MPLA's nationalist narrative, then they come from outside the realm of formal politics. One of these is in a more critical evaluation of history than was possible in the past. The past decade has witnessed challenges to the MPLA versions of history surrounding the storming of the Luanda prisons on 4 February 1961, and the attempted coup of 27 May 1977 and subsequent reprisals. This historical revisionism is notable in that it interrogates the MPLA's preferred view of its historical role and its version of nationhood. The reassessment of the prison attack undermines the MPLA's position as the progenitor of the Angolan nationalist struggle.

Finally, we may note attempts to liberate the idea of "the Angolan people" from its captivity by the discourse of the former liberation movements. The campaigns for a peaceful solution to the civil conflict, taken up by churches and other organisations in Angolan civil society from 1999 until the end of the war, explicitly addressed "the Angolan people" in a way that sought to construct "*o povo angolano*" as an entity with common interests that were at odds with the interests of the rival elites of the MPLA and UNITA.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the hip-hop artist MCK begins one of his raps with the words "*Cidadão angolense acorda!* (Angolan citizen, wake up!)" before proceeding to call attention to the material inequalities and social exclusion that exist under the current administration.<sup>38</sup> Even more provocatively, the opposition Youth,

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<sup>35</sup> In the most widely-reported incident, Defence Minister Kundi Paihama claimed that UNITA had retained arms caches since some of its leaders planned to return to war: an accusation vigorously denied by UNITA. Lusa news agency, 12 February 2008.

<sup>36</sup> According to official figures for the 2008 election, in Huambo province the MPLA won 82.05% of the vote to UNITA's 13.51%, and in Bié, the MPLA won 74.93% to UNITA's 18.25%: <http://www.cne.ao> By contrast, UNITA won both provinces in the 1992 elections. I have written elsewhere about the MPLA and UNITA's campaign strategies in the Central Highlands before the 2008 elections (Pearce 2008).

<sup>37</sup> See for example "O Calvário do povo Angolano", Episcopal Conference of Angola and São Tomé. 28 January 1999. [http://propace.br.tripod.com/texto\\_9.html](http://propace.br.tripod.com/texto_9.html); and the press release issued by Pro Pace, September 2001: "Up until now, international support has been directed either towards the MPLA government or the UNITA rebels – never towards the Angolan people, whose interests are not represented by those parties [...] This is what we are trying to change."

<sup>38</sup> "Têknikas, kausas e konsekwências", from the album *A Trincheira de Ideias* by MCK.

Workers' and Peasants' Alliance Party of Angola (PAJOCA) ended each of its allocated television broadcast slots during the 2008 election campaign with an ironic dedication to one or other hero of the Angolan liberation struggle, whose legacy, according to PAJOCA, had been betrayed by the current political leadership: for example, "to António Agostinho Neto, who said 'most important is to solve the people's problems,' and who was betrayed by his companions."<sup>39</sup>

Implicit in these observations is the fact that liberation retains the normative appeal that it had before and during the civil war, but the end of the war has brought about a change both in the content of ideologies of national liberation and in the way they are contested. Part of the work of nationalist ideology is to define the nation and to define its interests. This paper has demonstrated how the MPLA and UNITA defined the interests of the Angolan nation in mutually contradictory ways. Each movement defined oppression as that which was represented by its enemy, so as to allow it to define its own project as one of liberation.

The peace settlement of 2002 represented the triumph of the MPLA's set of definitions, not by consensus but by the superiority of military force. Ownership of the national narrative is no longer being contested on the battlefield, but the nature of the settlement is such that it created no space for nationalism to be contested within the sphere of parliamentary politics. The MPLA's current dominant position has allowed its version of nationalism to become normalised, with the party's long-held claims to be Angola's only liberation movement reinforced by new claims of having brought peace through its victory over UNITA.

## **Conclusion**

What, then, can these observations about the use of ideologies of emancipation by the MPLA and by UNITA tell us about how we consider Angolan history, and how we consider the workings of nationalism and other popular ideologies in the post-colonial world – particularly in situations of divided territorial control and contested sovereignty? For decades following Angolan independence, discussion of UNITA and the MPLA by non-Angolans was trapped within the discourses of the parties themselves: a good guys versus bad guys approach, if we are to apply a crude term to an equally crude representation of events. We have all heard the arguments or read the books and articles by well-meaning but poorly informed foreigners who regard Angola as a tabula rasa onto which to project their own romantic political fantasies, either by seeing the MPLA as a vanguard for international socialism and non-racialism, or by seeing UNITA as somehow embodying both "traditional" African values and Chicago school economics. Such approaches to Angola never even attempted critical distance. They started from the position that one or other party was the liberator and that its rival was by definition the oppressor, and bypassed questions about how legitimacy was constituted and established on either side. The approach that I have adopted to studying UNITA and the MPLA has demonstrated that maintaining normative distinctions (good or bad) or categorical distinctions (state or rebel movement) between them is less useful than looking at

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<sup>39</sup> Broadcast by PAJOCA on Televisão Pública de Angola, "Antena aberta" 22 August 2008.

them comparatively, and examining the ways in which they drew upon often similar discourses of state and nation. Each party needed the other, like Emmanuel Goldstein in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as the enemy in terms of which it defined its own vision of the Angolan nation. An important part of the discourse on both sides was the cultivation of perceptions of fear of the opposing side. By creating fear of the other side, each party justified its own use of organised violence as defensive, and therefore legitimate. Still more important to the production of a specifically nationalist discourse was the fact that both sides had foreign support. Thus UNITA could evoke the MPLA's Cuban backing as evidence of its non-Angolan nature, and the MPLA could denigrate UNITA as a puppet of apartheid and imperialism on the grounds of the support that it received from South Africa and the United States. The content of the MPLA and UNITA discourses were diametrically opposed, but the structure of the ideology on each side remained remarkably similar.

In the mid-1980s Crawford Young noted that in most of Africa, nationalist approaches to the study of history fell out of favour as disillusion replaced the hopes that that accompanied independence. What he was talking about, of course, was a particular kind of state-centred nationalism, and a particular kind of historiography that accompanied it. Since Young made this observation, a further generation of scholarship has investigated those strands of nationalism that did not become associated with ruling parties, discovering nationalist motivations in movements that later came to be seen as a subversive threat by the governments that took power.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the historical trajectory in much of Southern Africa, where liberation movements only took power in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s, is out of synch with the developments that caused scholars to turn away from nationalist perspectives elsewhere in the continent. Southern Africa, therefore, allows us to take a critical perspective on ideas of emancipation and on the ways in which they are deployed politically, and I expect that my fellow panellists will take up these themes with respect to other countries in the region. In Angola in particular, even though one liberation movement, the MPLA, came to occupy the institutions of state in 1975, the meaning of national liberation continued to be contested throughout the years of the civil war, and remains contested today despite the massive dominance of the MPLA in Angolan politics. The fact that there continues to be political value in this contestation is testimony to the continuing potency of the idea of national liberation.

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<sup>40</sup> For example, Alexander et al 2000; Anderson 2005.



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