

**The victor makes history**  
The challenges of oral research in post-war Angola

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This paper is intended as an initial reflection upon methodological questions arising from research conducted in the Central Highlands of Angola between May and November 2008, for the purposes of a doctoral thesis on local power relationships and questions of political identity in the region.<sup>1</sup> The research seeks to examine a time period that begins the 1960s – when anti-colonial movements began mobilising in Angola – continues through the years of near-continuous war between the MPLA state and the UNITA rebels (1975 to 2002), and ends in the present. The Central Highlands were chosen as a focus for my research, since this was the region in which UNITA as an independence movement made the strongest identity-based claims to allegiance among the Ovimbundu people, and where UNITA as a political party recorded its greatest concentration of votes in the 1992 elections. Previous accounts of post-independence Angola have emphasised external intervention and concentrated on the ideologies of political elites; such a perspective, while making a valuable contribution to our understanding of the broader context of the Angolan conflict, tells us nothing about how the conflict was understood by the people who found themselves in the midst of it, nor about the nature and extent of civilians' engagement with the rival armed movements.

The lack of written sources on the period in question – aside from the elite and non-Angolan accounts that have informed the existing historiography – has necessitated reliance on oral testimony, and it is the interpretation of this testimony that is my main concern in the present paper. This paper was written for a workshop dedicated to examining the challenges involved while conducting research in post-conflict situations. While infrastructure damage and other tangible consequences of war are still evident in Angola, these proved less significant an obstacle than the political situation in which I found myself working: a situation that was the direct consequence of the nature both of the conflict and of the manner in which that conflict was concluded in 2002. Although the government and UNITA went through the rituals of a negotiated settlement, in reality the agreement was entirely on the government's preferred terms, after it had for all practical purposes defeated UNITA in a long war of attrition.<sup>2</sup> Since then the government, through its control both of the MPLA party structures and of the resources of the state, has sought to consolidate its military victory by securing the allegiance of those people whom UNITA previously saw as its natural constituency, namely the rural population of south-central Angola: this involved imposing tight controls on public discourse, effected to a significant extent through the party-state's control of "traditional" leadership structures.

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1 The Central Highlands (Planalto Central in Portuguese) correspond to the provinces of Huambo and Bié, the eastern part of Benguela province and the north of Huila province. I have chosen to characterise the paper as "an initial reflection" since the timing of the workshop at which it was delivered necessitated that most of the paper be written while I was still engaged in field research. My ideas will doubtless change as I continue to research and to write the thesis, and the observations made here should therefore not be regarded as definitive.

2 Messiant (2006b) p 106.

Shortly after I began my doctoral research, I was paging through a beginner's manual for Umbundu, the dominant local language of the Central Highlands.<sup>3</sup> Among the proverbs that it listed was "*Oyula otunga esapulo*": the victor makes history. It seemed an uncannily suitable epigram for the situation that I was confronting. Some months later, as my research period was coming to an end, I was chatting to a farmer who gave me a ride in his truck, and who may have had this piece of Umbundu wisdom in his mind when he said to me in a conspiratorially lowered voice: "In reality, the government treated the people worse than UNITA, but in a war situation, the victor is always right."

One of the themes of my research is the intimate relationship between political loyalty and political control: more crudely stated, your loyalty is not to the person whom you want to be in power as one might expect in a democracy, but to the person whom you perceive to be in power. Such a relationship between loyalty and control might not be unique to post-conflict situations, but in the case of Angola, it is self-evident that this relationship was intensified, if not created, by the years of war between a one-party state that did not hesitate to use violence against its perceived opponents, and a rebel movement that ruled by the gun and tolerated no dissent. Whatever its origins, this kind of political relationship is one that has been exploited skilfully by the MPLA since the war ended, and more particularly as the 2008 parliamentary elections approached, in winning the allegiance of those people who had previously lived in areas controlled by UNITA. The result of this is that one of the objects of my research became, in the end, one of the most significant barriers to my research. The greater part of this paper will be dedicated to the consideration of how these barriers were constructed and the means whereby I attempted to circumvent them; first, however, I offer some notes on relevant aspects of the historiography of the Angolan and comparable civil wars in southern Africa, followed by a brief description of the historical context of my research.

## Historiography

The roots of the Angolan civil war are documented in a body of historical literature that deals with schisms within Angolan society that can be traced back to the early colonial period.<sup>4</sup> These social rifts are seen as giving rise to three rival liberation movements – the FNLA, MPLA and UNITA – in the 1960s, of which two – the MPLA and UNITA – remained at war until 2002. Accounts of the origins of the three movements emphasise the particular history of Angola's colonisation, characterised by regular colonial trade contacts dating to the late fifteenth century, in contrast with the late and inchoate efforts at colonial settlement and economic development in the interior of the country. Angola first became of importance to the Portuguese empire largely as a source of slaves. Early colonial settlement was minimal and confined to a few coastal centres, notably Luanda. Colonial contact led to the emergence of a creole class of Portuguese-speaking black and mixed-race Angolans, who came to dominate trade and administration in the colonial settlements. It was only in the twentieth century that Portugal took steps aimed at encouraging white settlement; it was only after 1950 that these efforts showed any results, and even then settlement and infrastructure development were geographically limited.<sup>5</sup>

The lack of economic and political consolidation in colonial Angola led to the formation of separate elite groups associated with different regions of the country, and differing in the nature of their

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3 Umbundu, standardised in the early 20th century from a variety of dialects spoken in the Central Highlands, is the common language of the people of the region, who are collectively known as Ovimbundu.

4 Heimer (1979), Guimarães (2001), Birmingham (2002), Messiant (2006).

5 Bender (2004).

relationship with colonial rule. The FNLA, based in exile in the then Zaire, mobilised on the basis of the anti-colonial resentment of northerners displaced from their land by Portuguese commercial farmers; the MPLA found its roots in a creole elite, resentful that their former position at the top of the Luanda socio-economic hierarchy had been usurped by twentieth-century settlers; and UNITA, its leaders educated in the mission schools of the interior, gathered support by challenging the lowly position of southerners within the colonial hierarchy.<sup>6</sup>

Yet while the existing historiography of Angola locates the origins of the civil war within internal social divisions, it tends to explain the progress of the war itself in terms of external factors, be they foreign government intervention during the Cold War, or the government's and UNITA's international trade links after 1992: the "resource war" model.<sup>7</sup> It is undeniable that without these factors, the war could not have lasted for as long as it did, yet such an emphasis does nothing to elucidate the local politics of the civil war, nor whatever changes may have taken place within a war setting to the contending discourses of identity and of national liberation that have been identified as underlying the formation of separate nationalist movements.<sup>8</sup> The silence of the available literature on these questions has much to do with previous practical difficulties in research.<sup>9</sup> One of the few researchers to have confronted these issues is the anthropologist Inge Brinkman, who conducted her research in Namibia, among refugees from south-eastern Angola.<sup>10</sup> The title of her book, *A War for People*, presents a concept that has proved useful in the interpretation of my own research findings in Angola: the centrality of the control of people (as opposed to the control of territory) both as a strategy and as a prize of war, and the implications that this has for political identities and self-perceived loyalties.

The end of the civil war has, at least at first glance, created a more conducive environment in which to start conducting research inside Angola about these questions of local politics and political identities in wartime. Given the lack of prior research on the case of the Angolan civil war – Brinkman's work notwithstanding – in framing my research questions I was influenced by the literature about local power relationships in comparable situations of conflict. The literature on the civil wars in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, in particular, provided some useful perspectives that could be brought to bear on an understanding of the Angolan case. I also drew inspiration from the methodology of these studies on Mozambique and Zimbabwe, which comprised extensive field interviews aimed at identifying local ideologies and recording people's experiences of those who wielded military force, and I was keen to apply such research methods in Angola.

The earlier Zimbabwe literature involves the period of armed struggle against the white minority regime in Rhodesia during the 1970s, in particular the relationship between armed movements and the rural population; a central debate in this literature concerns the relative importance of ideology and coercion in mobilising support for the guerrillas among the rural population.<sup>11</sup> Later writings on Zimbabwe have examined the continuities between wartime power relationships and contemporary political identities, and the uses of violence in Zimbabwean politics today.<sup>12</sup> The Mozambique literature, concentrating on RENAMO, the rebel movement established with the support of white Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa in the late 1970s, moves the debate beyond a dichotomy between

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6 Chabal (2002) pp 48-49; Messiant (2006) p 401; see also Birmingham (2002) pp 138-141 and Guimarães (2001) p 34.

7 Cilliers and Dietrich (2000).

8 Cramer (2003 and 2006) deals in detail with the analytical problems that arise from focussing only on resource availability as a determinant of conflict.

9 Minter (1994) p 217.

10 Brinkman (2005).

11 Ranger (1985), Kriger (1992).

12 Alexander and McGregor (2005); Alexander (2006).

coercion and loyalty: the most important lesson arising from it is perhaps a warning not to assume that an armed movement's methods and priorities were uniform at all times and in all places.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, most of the writing on civil war in Africa since the 1990s has taken a sceptical view of questions of regional, ethnic and other identities, seeing these not as inherent determinants of conflict, but rather as being moulded by conflict, sometimes to political ends.<sup>14</sup>

While the literature from elsewhere in the continent proved useful in framing questions on Angola, its focus on rebel movements means that it fails to address adequately the question of the relationship between the state and society in the areas under consideration. It assumes that the Mozambican and Rhodesian governments were established in their respective territories before the onset of guerrilla war, and takes for granted their relationships with society. Such an approach would be misguided in the case of Angola as it would imply that UNITA – as a guerrilla movement – sought to win territory and people from the control of the MPLA state. The reality was more complicated. In most of the country – including my research area of the Central Highlands – the MPLA and UNITA attempted more or less simultaneously to assume control as Portugal withdrew in 1975. Both parties enjoyed unchallenged control in parts of the country for long periods of time, and some contested territory passed from one side's control to the other more than once during the course of the war.

My approach to researching in Angola, therefore, has been to look at the MPLA and UNITA as equivalent forces, differing only in the degree to which they were able to use appeals to statehood in their attempts to legitimise themselves. Rather than take the MPLA's presence for granted – since in many cases it was barely present at all – my research interviews have been aimed at examining the MPLA's relationship with those people under its control no less critically than I sought to examine UNITA's relationship with the people under its control.

### **Angola today: the research context**

Analysis of the political and military developments that accompanied the end of the Angolan civil war is beyond the scope of this paper, but a brief résumé will, I hope, serve to shed some light upon the context in which I was working. Upon independence in 1975, the MPLA controlled little more than the capital, Luanda, while UNITA had more success in establishing itself in the countryside, and proclaimed independence in Huambo, the main city of the Central Highlands. In the years that followed, the MPLA – thanks largely thanks to Cuban military assistance – took control of most of the urban centres and established a state that essentially comprised urban enclaves, isolated in countryside that was either controlled by UNITA or remained beyond the control of either movement. From the late 1970s, UNITA re-armed with South African assistance, and in the early 1980s established a “bush capital”, known as Jamba, in the far south-eastern corner of Angola.

Soon after independence, the movement of people became a central strategy of war on both sides. When UNITA abandoned the city of Huambo early in 1976, it took a large part of the urban population with it: testimonies differ as to whether this was an act of abduction, or a voluntary movement of people fearful of the advancing Cubans. In the years that followed, UNITA lived off the labours of peasant farmers: sometimes through acts of pillage, sometimes by organising and taxing rural communities, convincing them that submission to UNITA was in their own best interests. The response of the MPLA government was to move whole communities physically into zones controlled by the

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13 Gersoni (1988), Geffray (1990), Hall (1990), Minter (1994), McGregor (1998), Schaffer (1999).

14 See for example Reyntjens (2001) for an overview of processes of ethnogenesis in DR Congo.

state, resettling them in the cities or on plots of land on the fringes of urban areas. UNITA continued to raid urban areas, regularly capturing people who were put to work in areas of UNITA control: skilled people such as teachers and nurses were highly valued, and were assigned work in their professional spheres in areas controlled by UNITA, particularly at Jamba.

By the late 1980s the civil war in Angola was at a stalemate, and changes in the international situation prompted the Cold War superpowers to support a negotiated settlement in Angola. The Bicesse agreement, signed in 1991, linked disarmament of the rival Angolan armies to democratic elections and the formation of an integrated defence force. Neither party complied with the disarmament requirements, and fighting broke out again shortly after the elections, which UNITA claimed were fraudulent. UNITA gained the upper hand and took control of most of the interior, including some major provincial cities. The MPLA, as the incumbent government, convinced most of the international community that its case was just. UNITA lost its foreign political backing, but for several years continued to thrive on revenues extracted from informal diamond mining in areas under its control. From 1997, international sanctions against diamonds mined in war zones – “conflict diamonds” – caused fatal damage to the rebel movement. By the end of the 1990s the Angolan Armed Forces had destroyed UNITA’s conventional military capacity and regained control of all the significant urban settlements in Angola.

UNITA as a guerrilla army proved itself still capable of acts of ambush and sabotage that challenged the authority of the Angolan state. While UNITA’s attacks demonstrated that it still had forces scattered over more than half of Angola’s territory, the final push by the Angolan Armed Forces (Forças Armadas Angolanas – FAA) against UNITA in 2001 was concentrated in the eastern province of Moxico, where Savimbi was believed to be hiding. Both in Moxico and in the Central Highlands, the FAA employed classic counter-insurgency tactics that were consistent with the way in which both armies had for many years battled for the control of people.

When Savimbi was shot dead by a FAA detail on February 22, 2002, UNITA’s demoralised surviving leaders accepted a peace agreement on the government’s terms. The demobilisation plan called for UNITA’s soldiers plus those civilians still living under UNITA control – about 100,000 people in total – to assemble in 34 quartering areas that were designated in various parts of the country. Most of them were later transported to their areas of origin. The Angolan state – and, in effect, the MPLA – was in control of the national territory for the first time ever, and UNITA, the party that had been the only real opposition since independence, had been thoroughly humiliated, its founder dead and its followers at the mercy of the government.

It was in this context that the government approached elections for the first time since the failed democratic experiment of 1992. After the 2002 peace settlement, the government accepted in principle to hold elections but these were repeatedly postponed until September 2008, when elections were held for a new parliament, with presidential elections scheduled for 2009. Official results showed the MPLA to have gained more than 80% of the parliamentary vote, recording some of its most dramatic victories in the provinces that had been won by UNITA in 1992. There were no robust independent mechanisms in place to prevent electoral fraud, and the size of the MPLA’s victory deserves to be treated sceptically. My research suggests, however, that although some ballot-stuffing very likely took place, persuasion of various sorts was probably the principal determinant of the gains recorded by the MPLA. In other words, few people wanted to be publicly associated with UNITA: not an auspicious state of affairs for a researcher who, among other things, wished to find out more about people’s co-operation with UNITA in the past.

### Three locations

My recent research was conducted at various locations in the Angolan provinces of Huambo and Huila between May and November 2008. The anecdotal accounts that follow give a brief account of some of my interviews in three different locations, which I have selected from my research notes on the basis that each location has a distinct local history. These accounts will, I hope, serve to illustrate some of the difficulties that arose from working in a situation where people did not feel free to talk about their previous relationship with UNITA, and how triangulation between different accounts helped to provide some resolution to the contradictions. They may also illustrate the social conventions that serve to shape consensus and to silence any potential dissent, as well as the strategies used by the party-state to control political discourse in rural communities.

**Location 1** is a valley not far from the city of Huambo<sup>15</sup>; the principal city of the Central Highlands region, Huambo remained under government control for most of the war, being occupied by UNITA for three months between November 1975 and February 1976, and for sixteen months between January 1993 and May 1994. On the other side of the valley is a range of mountains where UNITA maintained bases throughout the war. The residents of the valley found themselves between two opposing forces from 1975 until the early 1980s, when the government evacuated the area, moving some residents to the city and others to a resettlement camp beside a main road, where the authorities could ensure that the people were not helping UNITA in any way. Priests and Angolan development workers who had worked in the area for decades told me that the people in the valley had collaborated with both sides in order to ensure their own survival, until the government relocated them. My main interest here was to try to establish the nature of the political relationships, if any, that the two warring parties established with the residents of the valley during the years following independence, and preceding the evacuation of the area in the early 1980s.

My access to the area was facilitated by the nuns of a nearby monastery, who provide medical services and who have sponsored the building of schools in the villages of the valley. It was they who introduced me to the *sobas* (traditional leaders) of the various villages. On arrival in one particular village (location 1a) I had my courtesy discussion with the *soba*, and then asked to speak to some of the other villagers. I approached first an elderly woman: her first hesitant answers were too general and vague to be of any use at all, and after a few questions she insisted on calling in a male neighbour who, she said, knew more than she did. The neighbour then called on the *soba* who, he said, knew better than anyone else what had happened. Meanwhile, many other people, who had initially been crowding around the doorway, entered the house to listen to what was being said, and occasionally to participate. My attempts at conducting one-on-one interviews seemed to have failed, and I resigned myself to extracting what information I could from a group discussion. (I could always refer to it retrospectively as a focus group, so as to make this strategy appear deliberate rather than the result of unforeseen circumstances.)

I began by asking the older people for their memories of colonial times: many of my interviews began this way, as I tried to establish the specific grievances against the colonial state that might have prompted support for the independence movements and shaped the emergent discourses of Angolan nationalism. The elderly woman replied: “In colonial times we had to pay taxes. Once a year. It was obligatory. There was also another tax on people who made wine. After Angolans hit colonialism on

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15 I have not yet decided how specifically to identify locations when I publish my research: for the present purposes, I will simply identify them by numbers and brief descriptions.

the head in 1975, Angolans have been free to do what we want.”

When I asked what changes had come about with independence, the woman replied: “After the Portuguese left there were few people in the village. The war brought division – some went to Luanda, others to Benguela.”

One of the men contributed: “For us, the people, there was nothing to see. The only change was in the government.”

The *soba* added: “Life changed because there was a guerrilla war. At first the three movements fought together against the Portuguese. Then they decided to separate. The FNLA went away. The MPLA went to the cities and UNITA to the bush. This village was under the control of the MPLA.”

I assume that the “control” referred to here was no more than notional, for he continued: “The UNITA troops came many times, wanting only to steal things from the people. The MPLA also came to rob us. UNITA came to damage the people’s economy. There were no troops who respected the people. The MPLA came to take things away, UNITA came to take things away.”

When I asked what the government had done in terms of development since the end of the war, the villagers were adamant there had been none: the only assistance had been provided by the church. Although it was possible that my own association with the monastery led the people to over-emphasise the role of the church, the fact that they portrayed in a positive light the government’s decision to remove them from the area meant that it was unlikely that they would deliberately downplay any recent assistance from the government. In other words, it seemed they genuinely felt the government was providing nothing. Their stated allegiance to the ruling party seemed to stem from the fact that they had lived in a government-controlled area for a long period of time. Many people in this area would admit that UNITA had made identity-based claims of allegiance on the grounds of its leader, Jonas Savimbi, being from this part of the country. But any possible early identity-based allegiance appeared to have been trumped by the subsequent period of government control.

What, then, can one reasonably refer from these interviews about the nature of political relationships in wartime? People in Location 1a felt that there had been reasons for grievance against the colonial state, which provoked the desire for independence. It was interesting to contrast this perception with that of some other communities, who would see both positive and negative aspects to colonial rule: the tax regime was indeed harsh, but benefits for small farmers included a state-run produce marketing system which collapsed upon independence. Those communities who took a more ambivalent view of colonialism tended to be those who had not spent an extended period of time under unchallenged MPLA control, suggesting that the MPLA’s political education may have influenced how people chose to remember the colonial period.

Nevertheless, the awareness of colonial injustice – possibly influenced by MPLA politicisation – was not linked to a positive early experience of either independence movement, nor to a feeling that they had gained anything positive from independence. On the contrary: for the people in Location 1a, their early experience of the independence movements was as the victims of predation rather than as active collaborators. They were persuaded that forced removal was in their own best interest: this perception may be seen as the result of the experience of violence from both armies in the period prior to their removal, but, again, also as the result of politicisation within the securely government-controlled areas. Their identity as “government people” seems to stem from this period. This conclusion is consistent with an explanation I heard throughout my research period, whether I was talking to peasant farmers or to academics: that the primary determinant of political identity – whether a community was considered to be “government people” or “UNITA people” – depended not on any choice made by the community, but simply on which movement had assumed military and political command over that community.

Any expression of loyalty was the consequence of control, and this pattern continues today, with the MPLA state's control of the entire national territory being reflected in the party's overwhelming victory in the September elections.

The answers I received from this particular community did not help to answer my original question about the extent or nature of collaboration with the rival movements in the 1980s. There was much to be learnt from the silence on this question, but for the details, I would have to look elsewhere. In another village in the same valley (Location 1b), the nuns introduced me to an elderly man, Alberto<sup>16</sup>, who had once been a *soba*. The word "traditional" should always be treated with caution – but suffice to say that "traditionally", *sobas* are appointed for life. This *soba*, however, was now a former *soba*, as the government had replaced him with a younger man; since the *soba* is the point of contact between villagers and local government, his authority rests on recognition by the civil administration, a state of affairs that allows political necessity to trump tradition. The man who had been appointed to oust Alberto was an active member of the MPLA. Alberto, on the other hand, was unashamed to talk about his affiliation with UNITA during the civil war, even though he had no formal relationship with UNITA now; his refusal to join the MPLA had cost him his position as *soba*. More importantly for my research, he dared to tell me stories in which villagers were not the victims of UNITA, but instead co-operated with the rebel movement.

I wanted to find more people with similar stories to tell, so I asked Alberto if he knew anyone else who might be willing to speak to me about the relationship between UNITA and villagers. He told me of another man who lived in a village some distance away (Location 1c), and offered to take me there the following week. Alberto looked dismayed when I returned, on foot – he had expected me to come on a motorbike and give him a ride. But he nevertheless agreed to walk, and we tramped two and a half hours through the bush to the village where the other man, Fernando, lived. We found Fernando standing in his field some distance outside the village. This was encouraging, as I hoped he would have the opportunity to speak in private. But he insisted on taking me to the village: as we approached, we could hear music that was not quite loud enough to drown out the noise of the generator that was powering the sound system. I had arrived into the midst of a gathering to celebrate the consecration of the tombstones of some local notables who had died during the war.

Amid the revelry, Fernando insisted on introducing me to the *soba* of that village and to the secretary of the local MPLA branch. My visit turned into exactly the kind of group discussion that I had hoped to avoid. The *soba* here viewed me with considerably more suspicion than had been the case in the first village: I presume this was because this second village was outside the area to which the monastery provided services, and therefore my association with the monastery did not endow me with any legitimacy. He asked me to write a declaration stating the purpose of my visit, so that he could present it to the local administration should the officials there come and ask questions about foreigners in the area. This request, incidentally, seemed to be motivated more by his own fear of the authorities than by any attempt to intimidate me.

The ensuing conversation told me very little that I would not already have guessed. Fernando – the man whom I had walked so far to interview – barely participated. Whenever I directed a question at him specifically, he would simply echo the views expressed by the others. However, as we took our leave, Fernando looked me in the eye, asked for my telephone number, and promised to contact me the next time he visited Huambo city, where his son lives. Sure enough, a few days later he phoned me and we

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16 For the purposes of this paper, I am protecting the anonymity of my sources by arbitrarily assigning pseudonyms to all interviewees.



met at his son's house, where he provided a detailed account of the kind of political relationship that UNITA sought to establish in the areas where it enjoyed unchallenged control over rural people. It was clearly a partisan account, but one that formed a useful counterpoise to what I had already heard.

Fernando's fear was evident as he sought my assurance that the interview be kept anonymous. I began to understand why, during my visit to the village, he had insisted that I talk first to the officials: had anyone in the village seen him having a private conversation with me, the consequences could have been serious. Fernando had fields in the village, and with his life that straddled the urban and rural worlds he seemed to be more prosperous than most of the subsistence farmers in the area. The usufruct of land in rural Angola, however, is at the discretion of the local *soba*: given the interconnection of the roles of *soba*, local administration and the ruling party, it became plain to see how much Fernando had to lose. It was also evident that as someone who was known to have spent time in UNITA-controlled areas, he had to be particularly careful to present this history in a way that made him a victim of UNITA rather than a collaborator.

My experiences in Location 1 made me aware of some unanticipated obstacles raised by the social and cultural context in which I was working, which limited the nature of the information I was able to obtain, and made it all the more important that I treat my findings with a critical eye:

First, it is impossible to have a private interview in an Angolan village, unless you are prepared to hire security guards to keep the bystanders away – an approach which no doubt raises its own ethical problems.

Second, knowledge is the common property of a community. There is an element of consensus in how knowledge is produced, in how a particular interpretation of events is devised: but the *soba* wields a disproportionate amount of influence in determining what can and what cannot be said.

Third, the lesson of Fernando and Location 1c: Even those who disagree with the consensus nevertheless will at least pay lip service to it, and will not try to circumvent the controls on discourse that are imposed by the social and political structures in the villages. I was fortunate enough to know something of Fernando's history, and therefore sought him out. Even more fortunate for me, he was courageous and accommodating enough to make an arrangement to meet me again and to tell his story. The incident also served a reminder that cities are safer than villages: at least in the sense that in the city it's possible to have a private conversation without it being reported all the way up the government and party hierarchies. I could only wonder how many other stories were suppressed on those many occasions during my research when the social and political mores of the village necessitated group discussion.

These first interviews suggested that in order to hear first-hand accounts of co-operation with UNITA, I would have to seek out people who still retained sympathy for the former rebel movement – and that these people would be hard to find. So I went to the provincial office of UNITA, and asked if they could direct me to communities where people were more openly identified with UNITA. I was aware how problematic this tactic was, but given the difficulties in accessing non-partisan accounts, it seemed preferable to have access to differing partisan accounts rather than to record nothing more than a consensus induced by fear. The UNITA officials were charming and helpful as opposition parties so often are (and governments so seldom). They directed me to the municipal UNITA office in another town in the province, from where I received an introduction to a community in which a number of

former UNITA soldiers lived. The community was in a peri-urban *bairro*<sup>17</sup> (**Location 2**), which had originally been built by the government as a settlement for people who had voluntarily left, or been involuntarily removed from, UNITA-controlled areas during the war in the 1990s. Some of these people had chosen to remain there at the end of the war 2002, but others had returned to their home areas. As they left, a new kind of person began arriving in the settlement: former UNITA soldiers and their families, who had been unable to return to their own home areas because of the fear of vengeance from MPLA loyalists.

Here there were two ranks of gatekeepers to contend with: the complex of government-*soba*-MPLA that exists everywhere; and the de facto elders of what I later realised was a sub-community associated with UNITA. These older members of the UNITA community also insisted on being present when I interviewed the younger members: those in their early twenties who had served UNITA as teenagers. Despite the expectations that this created, some of these young men nevertheless frankly described their experience at the hands of UNITA as one of kidnap. Others talked about having joined UNITA to defend their country's independence – at the age of twelve. Reading between the lines here required no great skill. Nevertheless, I failed to gain a detailed picture of the internal social structures that existed within UNITA in wartime. I also received accounts of the organisational structures that UNITA established in areas under its control in order to offer education and health services, to organise agriculture and to feed its troops – though the continuing loyalty to UNITA of the interviewees here meant that these descriptions must be seen as expressions of an ideal espoused by UNITA rather than a necessarily accurate description of how things functioned in all situations. What was most useful from my research in this area was how political discourse favourable to UNITA constructed the rebel movement as a benevolent provider as well as the promoter of a just cause. The varying success of UNITA's implementation of its plans would become clear later.

My entry into the community through the introduction of the local UNITA office meant that I had bypassed the other rank of gatekeepers, namely the government authorities. This was a mistake for which I, and my UNITA interviewees, would be made to pay. After I had visited the area on a Saturday, I received a phone call on the Monday morning from Vicente, one of the elderly UNITA men. The previous day, the *soba* had summoned Vicente to what sounded like a community tribunal in which all the other participants were active members of the MPLA, accusing him of illegal hosting a foreigner who, it was implied, had some sort of subversive agenda. The *soba* had ordered Vicente to come to a meeting on the Monday with the vice-administrator of the district. Vicente asked if I would please come along to this meeting and present my credentials so as to save him and his family and friends from any further trouble.

At the meeting, after the *soba* had had his say, the vice-administrator explained to me, calmly and politely, that permission was needed for me to visit the area in question – he justified this in terms of my own safety, and the fact that the authorities would need to be able to take responsibility should I come to any harm. I duly wrote a letter requesting permission, and a few weeks later was called back to the administration to collect a letter, stamped and signed by the administrator, authorising my work in the neighbourhood. In the end I was pleased with this development, because I had been keen to talk to the *soba* and the other government-supporters in the settlement: they were all people formerly displaced by war, and no doubt had their own interesting stories to tell.

When I returned, the *soba* didn't even ask to look at the letter of authorisation I had obtained, and was

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<sup>17</sup> *Bairro* translates directly as “neighbourhood” - in the Angolan context, it normally refers to a poor, outlying region of a town, often semi-rural in character, and outside the limits of the formal settlement built during colonial times.

happy to talk to me. I learnt that he too had spent time working in a UNITA-controlled area; this and other similar interviews with people who had previously been in UNITA and were now loyal to the government provided a telling point of comparison with the accounts by people whose wartime allegiance to UNITA continued in their devotion to the party today. I arranged to go back a few days later to interview more people who were manifestly government supporters. This time I was met by the secretary of the MPLA branch in the *bairro*, who said I must first accompany him to the party committee in the town to seek authorisation. When I pointed out that I had a letter from the government, which represented a higher authority than the party, he replied: “but it’s the party that directs the government”. The logic that underlay the subsequent events was not clear to me: but the *soba* and the party secretary accompanied me into the town where we went not to the party office but to the administration, and were received by another official whom I had not met before. I knew he was neither the vice administrator nor the administrator (who officially are the two most senior people in the administration) but he nevertheless seemed to have the power to demand that I hand over my letter from the administrator, on the grounds that there were “errors” in it. I did not subsequently try to return to the area.

Again, there were a number of lessons to be learnt from my experiences in Location 2. First, the impossibility of having a one-on-one conversation was as much of an obstacle as it had been in Location 1, and once again the only way around this was by reading the silences, and noting the context in which things had been said for the purposes of triangulating with other interview accounts. A second lesson served to make clearer what I will call the governmental restrictions on me as a researcher, and on political discourse within sections of Angolan society. (I use “governmental” since to call these restrictions “legal” would imply they were codified in a way which I do not believe to be the case.) As an obvious foreigner, I am at liberty to move around the former colonial central areas of Angolan towns, interviewing whoever is willing to be interviewed by me. As soon as I step into a village (Location 1) or a peri-urban *bairro* (Location 2), a new set of unwritten rules applies, and a visa which is in theory valid for the whole of Angola suddenly acquires limitations.<sup>18</sup> There are strong echoes here of Mamdani’s citizen-subject distinction here: the notion that the incorporation of traditional authority into the apparatus of the post-colonial African state deprives a large section of the population of the rights of citizenship.<sup>19</sup> As a foreigner who had dared to go where foreigners are not meant to go, I too had subjected myself to the arbitrary rule that is the everyday experience of governance in these areas: even the signature and stamp of the highest authority in the district were not enough to smooth my work. Once again, the obstacles that I encountered in my research about the past provided an insight into the means by which Angola is governed today. This in turn offers an explanation for the apparent disjuncture between the relatively free political environment that can be witnessed in the larger Angolan towns, and the extraordinarily large proportion of votes won by the MPLA in September. I heard a number of independent accounts of rural voters being told “there is a camera in the polling booth that can see which party you vote for, and if you don’t vote for the MPLA there will be trouble”. The camera in the polling booth may have been a myth, but like so many myths it embodied a real anxiety: in this case, an anxiety that was born of the close interpenetration of “traditional”, state and party power structures within rural and peri-urban society. (A further anecdotal example of this was evident when I arrived in another interview location. Here the district administrator, a staunch MPLA member, was nothing but kindness and courtesy, and said I should start my research by meeting the *sobas* at the “*casa dos sobas*” – the house of the *sobas*. This house, where three *sobas* lived, turned out

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18 This distinction seemed not to apply in the capital, Luanda, where the *bairros* are entirely urban in character, as opposed to the semi-rural *bairros* of the provincial towns. The fact that crime is rife in the Luanda *bairros* and rare in the provincial *bairros*, incidentally, gives the lie to the suggestion that the restrictions placed on my movements were in the interests of my personal safety.

19 Mamdani (1996).

to be on the premises of the local branch of the MPLA.)

I was still eager to find relatively independent accounts of life under UNITA – by which I mean accounts by people who had not themselves held office within UNITA, but who would also be able to resist the pressure to rewrite their histories in a manner favourable to the government. This led me to **Location 3**, a Catholic mission station in an area that was contested by UNITA and the MPLA around the time of independence, and repeatedly throughout the 1980s. Shortly after independence, many of the original inhabitants of the area were taken by government forces to the nearest town (about 80km away) and resettled there. Many other inhabitants were removed from the area by UNITA forces, and taken to the rebel movement's bases in the bush. (The mission itself was abandoned by the church and used as a military base by both armies in turn.) After the peace settlement of 1991, those people who had been evacuated by the government returned home. They subsequently found themselves under the control of UNITA, which took control of the area in the fighting that followed the 1992 elections, and retained secure control until the government initiated a new campaign against the rebels in the late 1990s. The area remained contested until the very end of the war in 2002. Many of the people who had lived under the control of UNITA are still in the area today. Some received jobs with the government, but all came under pressure to renounce their links with UNITA.

One incident served as a vivid illustration of the political tensions that persist in the area: Earlier in 2008, a priest who worked at the mission had been obliged to leave after hearing that some MPLA members were calling for him to be killed. The threats stemmed from an incident in which MPLA members had chased UNITA members away from a recently installed water pump, saying that since it was the MPLA government that had installed the pump, the UNITA members had no right to use it. The following Sunday, the priest mentioned this incident during mass, and told his congregation it was wrong to fight over facilities that were meant for the whole community. He consequently was accused of being a “UNITA priest”, and some MPLA members called for his death.

In such an atmosphere one can reasonably expect that people might rewrite their stories into a version more favourable to the ruling party, yet this did not occur in every case. This may be due in part to the status and educational level of my interviewees in Location 3. While all of them came from peasant farmer communities, and farming constituted their main livelihood, all had at least six years of schooling, considerably more than the interviewees in village 1a, for example. All of them had since a young age been actively involved in the life of the Catholic church, and their identification with the church had given them a perspective that to a certain extent replaced the need for a political affiliation, and this allowed for a greater degree of reflection and self-insight than had been the case with the interviewees in the locations discussed previously. The political processes that had shaped these men's versions of reality thus became more transparent, and this has provided a useful reference point when analysing the more opaque accounts that I had received elsewhere.

Two interviews that I conducted in Location 3, with two men whose life histories were similar yet whose perceptions of the war were very different, serve as an illustration of the sort of contradictory accounts that I heard. The first interviewee, Paulo, was born in the area in 1971. Asked about when the independence movements came to the area he replied: “Before 1976, the people (of this area) lived without any party – they lived in the care of the mission, religiously.”

Later, Paulo continued, “UNITA pulled people to the bush, the MPLA pulled people to the cities. The MPLA managed to take a greater number of people to the cities, because it was able to mobilise, able to explain what the people liked to hear. UNITA killed intellectuals who were discovered – killed catechists, killed anyone with skills. So the people ran away from UNITA to the MPLA. The majority

to the cities. UNITA killed the rest or took them away.

“After the 1991 [peace] accords, the people decided to return here. UNITA took the opportunity to mobilise them. [UNITA] took advantage of the peace to promise free education, health and food. ... When UNITA saw the area was full (of returnees) they started to close the access roads so the people could no longer go to the cities. [UNITA] began to enslave the people, taking away everything that came from the people (i.e. agricultural produce). Young men who had grown up in the MPLA were forced to join UNITA’s troops. Anyone who had assets, such as a car, was killed. People had no right to possessions, nor to democracy. Everything a person had was taken away. People were left without clothes or salt<sup>20</sup> – they walked naked.

“Since 2002 there has been peace. People have been enjoying peace and the right to democracy.”

When I asked Paulo if there were still UNITA supporters in his community he replied: “People stopped supporting UNITA because of maltreatment. These days, the majority are with the MPLA. The only ones still with UNITA are those who resisted from 1976 until today. It was the MPLA who saved the people.”

Since Paulo was still a child during the 1970s, we must assume that his analysis of the politics of the time comes from whatever he learnt from his parents, from other members of the community or from whatever propaganda he encountered in his education. Noteworthy points within his account are:

His perception that the people were apolitical before independence: this was a common theme in many of my interviews, and presumably reflects the fact that the independence movements failed to penetrate this part of Angola before the political liberalisation that followed the coup in Portugal in April 1974.

The forced displacement of people by both armies as a political strategy and the congruence between space and control, with the MPLA and UNITA becoming associated with an urban / rural dichotomy.

Notwithstanding his recognition that forced displacement took place on both sides, he speaks of support for the MPLA having been voluntary and inspired by the party’s benevolence.

UNITA’s relationship with the people, by contrast, is portrayed as purely predatory, and life under UNITA was unremittingly miserable. The logical consequence of this is the fact that the people in the region now support the MPLA.

The second interviewee, José, was born near the mission in 1967, and began his education at the mission school before being moved by the government to the town after independence.

“We were taken from here [to the town 80km away] by the MPLA’s forces, FAPLA.<sup>21</sup> [...] Others remained here [near the mission] under the control of UNITA. [...] Life in the town was normal, despite a separation between the natives of the town and those of us who were considered displaced people.

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20 In all my interviews about life in UNITA-controlled areas, the fact that salt had been unobtainable during the years of rebel control was by far the most common complaint that I heard – it was voiced even by those who were generally well-disposed towards UNITA.

21 FAPLA (Forças Armadas Populares para a Libertação de Angola) was the name of the Angolan state’s defence force until the peace agreement of 1991, when the planned merger with UNITA’s army – though never fully realised – led to the formation of the FAA.

The authorities told them ‘you mustn’t mistreat one another’. [When UNITA tried to attack the town] the local people said to us: ‘your cousins are coming because of you’.”

When I asked whether the displaced people did indeed have any kind of social relationship with UNITA, José told me that UNITA soldiers would come into the peri-urban *bairros* of the town at night, and talk to the displaced people who lived there. They would talk about common home areas, or share information about common friends. There were also people in the town who helped UNITA, he told me.

“[UNITA] created bases near the town and they would come into the town, talk to the *sobas* and explain the reasons for the war between the parties. They would say ‘our war is for everyone to be the rulers of this fatherland – for people to cease suffering and to live in peace’. They said our country’s wealth was being taken away by others.”

Asked whether the people accepted these ideas propagated by UNITA, José replied: “some did, others didn’t”.

Aged 15, José was “captured” by FAPLA – the government army. Because of “suffering” in the army, he ran away to the capital, Luanda, living with relatives and involved in small trade, so as not to be caught by the army again. With the peace that preceded the 1992 elections, José returned to the area of his birth: “There we found houses destroyed, bush where there had been villages.” However: “When we arrived we were well received by UNITA, each of us was directed to an area (in which to live). We then came to know we must abandon the politics of *there* (i.e. the other place, the government) and enter the politics of UNITA.

“Because I had passed sixth grade I went to do a teacher training course and was placed in a school as a teacher. I was a teacher with UNITA for ten years. There was a difference between UNITA’s teaching and the government’s teaching. With the government it was just about passing grades. With UNITA, it was so that a person would know things.”

Teaching, however, was difficult. “There was no electricity. There was no chalk – just charcoal. We worked very hard.”

José also noted that “with UNITA each area had a health post, although medicine was not abundant. So they had ways of using roots and other things (as natural remedies). But it was all free of charge.

“With UNITA each village was obliged to have a field for the party (used to grow food for official visitors) and also had to contribute food for the troops. Each village created a granary where maize was stored.”

José described a hierarchical system of administration with officials at provincial, municipal and local level. He spoke of a justice system with trained magistrates, who would mete punishments ranging from prison sentences for serious offences to extra work in the fields for serious offences. The well-organised systems that he had described started to break down, he said, as UNITA’s army was put to flight by the government’s offensives that began in 1998.

With the end of the war in 2002, José proceeded to one of the quartering areas that had been set up in terms of the peace settlement for UNITA soldiers and others who had worked for UNITA. As someone who had experience as a teacher under UNITA, he was able to register as a teacher with the government education department, and later was granted a job. However, teachers formerly attached to UNITA had been ordered to join the MPLA, and those who declined to do so – including José himself – had had their salaries withheld.

While these accounts by Paulo and by José of the same places in the same period appear to differ widely, the differences are to a certain extent matters of interpretation rather than matters of fact. The absence of basic foodstuffs, for example, is seen by Paulo as proof that UNITA had no concern for the people under its control, while for José the fact that teachers managed to get by without chalk and books, and that its medical staff experimented with herbal remedies, is evidence of the resilience and

dedication that UNITA inspired in its followers. Where Paulo sees UNITA robbing the people of their food, José sees a well-organised system of redistribution that operated according to a logic identical to that of taxation in a recognised state: contributions to a central authority, which in turn had a duty of care, and a duty of protection, towards the people in its territory.

How are we to interpret their differing interpretations of this period? Partisan influence is clear: what is more complicated is trying to establish how the two men's differing party convictions developed and were sustained. That Paulo is waving the flag for the MPLA is clear in phrases such as "the MPLA saved the people". It is therefore worth making a comparison between the rest of his account of history and official MPLA discourses. Elsewhere in the province, a few months before the 2008 parliamentary elections, I had witnessed MPLA officials campaigning in a village. The principal tactic seemed to be to remind people of the deprivation and violence they had suffered in the time of UNITA control. This message was echoed in Paulo's interview with me. This is not to say that he is fabricating events, but rather that we must be aware that recent political pressure is very likely to have been brought to bear on his interpretation. His own discourse serves to conceal these pressures, which are made explicit in José's account.

José's negative experience of life in the (government) army has apparently led him to see the government as a predatory force with no more moral legitimacy than UNITA. An alternative interpretation might be that he had prior pro-UNITA convictions that caused him problems in the army. It is interesting to compare José's account with the accounts of others who were conscripted into the army. Even those who accepted that this was inevitable, and who through their time in the military came to accept the justice of the MPLA's cause, nevertheless used words like "raptar" (capture) when they talked about the process whereby they entered the military. No one volunteered, and even MPLA loyalists saw the conscription process as arbitrary rather than procedural. Desertion, however, was exceptional. Dissatisfaction with army life, therefore, is not in itself an adequate explanation for José's actions.

Similarly, there are a number of factors we must bring into account when interpreting his description of the visits by UNITA to the town. Was this an exceptional occurrence that contributed to his generally sympathetic attitude towards UNITA? Or was a more commonplace occurrence that was suppressed in the accounts of other interviewees for political reasons? Subsequently when I interviewed other displaced people who had lived in that town during the same period I made a point of asking about UNITA's clandestine visits, and despite my deliberate questioning, no one else reported a comparable experience. This leads me to believe that José's family was part of a community of clandestine UNITA sympathisers within the wider community of displaced people in the town, and that this had an impact on his doubts about the legitimacy of the state, and the justice of UNITA's cause.

Throughout both these life stories, we can see a mutually reinforcing relationship between the men's political convictions and their interpretation of historical fact right up until the recent past. José refused to join the MPLA, therefore his teacher's salary was withheld, and hence he is not inclined to censor or to rewrite his life history in a way favourable to the ruling party – even though he denies being actively involved with UNITA at the moment.

Clearer evidence of the process of selective memory can be discerned in an account by a third man from the same district, Francisco, who is some twenty years older than Paulo and José, and whose convictions appeared more obviously pro-MPLA than the generally pro-government sentiments expressed by Paulo. Francisco's age meant that he would have adult memories right back to the 1960s, and so I planned my interview questions chronologically. When I asked him about the period of

UNITA control that began in the early 1990s, Francisco told me: “All the *comunas*<sup>22</sup> were occupied by UNITA. We lived in the mountains – we were unable to work. We lived without salt, without clothes – we lived on wild fruit.”

I found it unlikely that he had survived ten years of UNITA occupation on a diet of wild fruit, so I asked him if there had been a time when things were different. He replied: “There was a time when the UNITA troops organised the people to cultivate normally – a bit for UNITA, a bit for us. A certain quantity had to be given to UNITA each year. We had to carry the food to the UNITA bases. Whoever refused would be killed.”

Francisco thus admits there was a logic to UNITA’s actions, rather than the bloody anarchy described by Paulo. Yet in recounting his memories to me, he had chosen first to talk about the final years of life with UNITA, when UNITA was not really in control at all, but battling to maintain its grip on the population while under heavy military pressure. Here I was able to confirm some of the details about how UNITA operated, but also to draw conclusions from the way in which, initially, he had told his story selectively.

### **The power of the chance remark**

A brief diversion before I conclude: I would like to make a case for the chance remark as admissible evidence. Often I would excuse myself after an informal conversation to scribble some notes on what I had just heard. Such notes, while not much use alone, proved to be useful elements in putting together a bigger picture: and I give two examples in support of my contention that when one is working within a restrictive environment, any piece of testimony is worthy of consideration.

My first example involves one of those passing remarks that can be so revealing of the ideological framework within which the speaker operates. One Sunday afternoon a friend in Huambo took me to visit a friend of his, a government official who, my friend told me, had survived months of imprisonment in appalling conditions during UNITA’s occupation of the city. It was a social visit, but one which my friend hoped could lead to a useful interview opportunity for me. We chatted about my research, and I explained that I was trying to research the internal dynamics of the Angolan conflict, as opposed to the existing histories that tended to dwell on international intervention. His response to this was abrupt: There was no internal dimension to the Angolan conflict, since it was entirely the result of foreign aggression. We scheduled a time for a formal interview later that week, but he failed to appear, and did not respond to further requests for a meeting. That one remark, however, has gone into my notes as an indicator of a particularly example of the MPLA’s wartime discourse: there was no internal opposition to the MPLA, and UNITA was simply the tool of South African and Western aggression.

My second example involves the confirmation of hard historical fact. Numerous interviewees had told me something along the lines of: “Anybody in the bush [that is, anyone living outside the limits of the government-controlled towns] was considered to be UNITA and FAPLA would kill them or capture them and take them away.” On the basis of these interviews, I felt there was an element of truth in this assessment; but I suspected that some of my interviewees may have been influenced by their own antipathy towards the government, or their support for UNITA, in interpreting experiences in such a way as to impute that the soldiers were acting according to a systematic policy.

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22 The territorial division that forms lowest level of the hierarchy of administration.



Conversations with former FAPLA soldiers, however, made the picture clearer. On a number of occasions, when talking informally to men who said they had served in the army, I would ask “what happened if while you were on duty, you found civilians in the bush?” The answer was always something like: “Our instructions were not to harm them, but to present them to the commander, who would hand them over to the civilian authorities to be resettled in the towns.”

I very much doubt these men would have been comfortable talking to me about their days in the army in a formal interview situation. But thanks to the rather irregular tactics that I adopted, and the consistency of the stories that I heard, I have no more doubts that FAPLA did indeed have a systematic policy of removing people from the bush in order to bring them, physically, under government control.

## **Conclusion**

At the start of this project, I had envisaged spending many days sitting in rural villages and hearing frank, detailed and nuanced accounts of history from people of many different strata of rural Angolan society. With hindsight, this expectation seems naive. Why was I so unrealistically optimistic? Upon reflection, I have realised that my optimism stemmed from my earlier work as a journalist in Angola, during the last months of the civil war. The relative freedom that I enjoyed then, and the apparently greater willingness of my interviewees to talk freely and frankly, was not the result of the absence of gatekeepers: it was simply that the gatekeepers were different. Back then, I conducted many of my interviews in displaced people’s camps in which NGOs fulfilled many of the functions of government; during 2002, other important work locations were the quartering areas which, for a while, functioned as self-contained UNITA communities with the old UNITA hierarchies still intact. The party-state was yet to extend its power over the people who had formerly lived under UNITA – during that transitional phase a greater variety of stories could be heard more freely than is the case today. Those interviews from the first years of the present decade may not have been as comprehensive as the interviews that I have conducted in the past six months, but they will nevertheless serve as useful points of comparison.

Today, as this paper has outlined, more complex obstacles have to be negotiated when doing oral historical research in Angola. In the context, there are certain things that I have realised could not be realistically achieved. First, I was not able to conduct quantitative research: no great loss, since this was never my intention. The kind of codified categorisations that quantitative research requires are, I believe, of little use when political identities are in flux, and when oral accounts need to be carefully scrutinised in order to discern the political and community influences that have an impact on how memories are recounted.

Second, it proved impossible for me to get any real insight into the internal workings of rural communities: to discern, for example, the dynamics of gender, generation and economic status within a village. This was more of a disappointment. The lesson of Kriger’s work on Zimbabwe, for example, is that one ought not to assume a consensus within any community in terms of how the members of that community engaged with political movements. In Angola, I did not manage to move beyond a single dominant discourse within a community. In particular, it was difficult to find women interviewees who were prepared to speak to me independently. Possibly a woman researcher would have had more success in winning women’s confidence. However, the sidelining of women was only one aspect of a larger process whereby consensus was shaped within a community: a process which, as my examples have illustrated, was the result of an interaction between the hierarchies within a community, and strong political pressure being brought to bear from outside the community, by the ruling party and the state. To overcome this will necessitate building a relationship of trust that will require more than the

relatively short time that I had in which to do my research in Angola. A change in political circumstances might also make a difference, whether for better or for worse. It was clear during my research period that the government and ruling party were making assiduous efforts to control political discourse in rural areas, presumably in anticipation of the parliamentary election in September this year, and the presidential election expected in 2009. It could be that the political environment will become freer once the MPLA's candidate wins the presidential election, as he certainly will. But it could also be that the consolidation of the party's power will only serve to hasten and to endorse the processes of selective remembering and self-censorship that have been evident during my research this year.

Despite these obstacles, research over the past six months has made it possible to obtain a picture of the different strategies of rule adopted in relation to rural people by the MPLA and by UNITA at different times, and how these changed in accordance with the changing military fortunes of the two movements. It has helped to reveal how and to what extent these strategies shaped the political identities of people under the often-changing control of the rival movements. It has been possible to discern dominant local ideologies: by which I mean the ideologies dominant within a particular community, and to trace the historical events and processes that had shaped these ideologies. It has also been possible to identify differing responses to violence and to coercion, though here again it has been necessary to pay attention to a circular relationship between the how experience of coercion or violence is remembered, and the perception of legitimacy. In all these cases, comparison of narratives and scrutiny of silences and inconsistencies has provided not only an approach to the verification of historical fact, but also a means of tracking the ways in which political pressure was brought to bear on personal accounts.

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