

Book review

Political Identity and Conflict in Central Angola, 1975-2002

Pearce, Justin 2015

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Angola, located in Central Africa, is one of the most resource-rich areas in the world. The country is described as a model case in which natural resources provoke and sustain a conflict. The protracted civil war, which ravaged the country between 1975 and 2002, was mainly financed by and through those involved in the wholesale extraction of oil and diamonds. The conflict began as a struggle for independence and national liberation from Portuguese colonial rule. During the early 1960s, the agitation led

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to violence, which escalated in 1961. After many years of conflict, Angola gained independence in 1975. However, a fight for dominance broke out among the three nationalist movements: the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), founded in 1956; the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), established in 1961; and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), founded in 1966. This degenerated into a civil war.

What played out during the civil war was a combination of Angola's violent internal dynamics and massive foreign intervention. Many foreign nations and entities played key roles in the prosecution and eventual outcome of the war as they positioned themselves to reach their own strategic objectives in the region. The crisis in Angola developed into a Cold War battleground as the superpowers (the United States of America and the Soviet Union) and their allies delivered military assistance to their preferred clients. The United States supported FNLA but supplied aid and training for both the FNLA and UNITA, while troops from Zaire assisted the FNLA. China, also, sent military instructors to train the FNLA. The Soviet Union provided military training and equipment for the MPLA. Cuba, in coordination with the Soviet Union, sent troops to Angola in support of the MPLA. During the summer of 1975, the Soviet-supported MPLA managed to consolidate power in Luanda, the country's capital, and oust the US supported FNLA from the capital, but the FNLA continued to attack. Also, in October 1975, South Africa sent troops to support the FNLA and UNITA and began conducting operations against the MPLA. Thus, Angola became the site of a proxy war. The external influence escalated the conflict as the warring sides continued to engage in civil war.

While many accounts of the conflict focused on the foreign intervention in the Angolan conflict, Justin Pearce's *Political Identity and Conflict in Central Angola, 1975-2002* examines the internal politics of the war that divided Angola for more than a quarter of a century after independence. The research attempts to fill a major gap in the literature by interrogating the internal dynamics of the Angolan conflict, paying particular attention to the relationship between the elites and the broader Angolan population.

The book is based on interviews with members of the elite and with ordinary people in towns and rural areas. These interviews helped to document how ideologies of state and nation developed on both sides of the Angolan conflict and how these came to define the relationship between political movements and people. The book provides an insightful introduction and follows with nine chapters, which examine the period from independence in 1975 until the peace initiatives of the late 1980s.

Specifically, the book examines, on the one hand, the mechanics of the relationship between political or military power and expression of political identity – how the creation and sustenance of ideas of grievance and identity became politically functional and to what extent people were able to articulate ideas that challenged those of the dominant political movement. Pearce illustrates how people's reactions to political education were not uniform but were influenced by factors such as their occupation, location, experience of events, and whether they had previously come into contact with different political ideas. On the other hand, the book interrogates how the ruling party, the MPLA, and its adversary, UNITA, both sought hegemonic control over people in the parts of Angola that it dominated by trying to make its power legitimate in the eyes of those over whom it ruled.

Pearce's account started with a problem about political identity: what did it mean to be a 'member' of UNITA or to be a 'government person' during the Angolan war? The introductory section began with a quote from a young woman in the town of Mavinga – a town at the centre of the MPLA-UNITA military struggle: 'I used to be a member of UNITA. But now I'm a member of the government'. Q: 'Why are you a member of the government?' A: 'Because I am here with the government' (p.1). In other words, she identified with UNITA when she was 'caught' by UNITA many years ago, and her allegiance changed when she was 'caught' by the government more recently (p. 2). Thus, political identity for many Angolans appeared to be defined in terms of the political movement that ruled over the territory where they were staying at a particular time. Peasant farmers, particularly those who had suffered violence from both armies at different times, had no choice but to cooperate with whichever was dominant in order to avoid

punishment. Additionally, the question of identity was further complicated by the fact that military and civilian officials on both sides habitually assigned identity to people simply on the basis of where the people were.

From the extensive interviews conducted, Pearce was able to show that each side of the conflict was associated with a distinct set of narratives about Angolan history, about the role of the two political movements within this history and the relationship of the movements to the Angolan people. As such, only a minority of the people interviewed had ever been in a position to listen to both sides and to make a choice about which of the two best represented their interests. For most of them, their earliest consciousness of politics was constituted within the narratives of one or other political movement. People who lived in the government-controlled towns for the most part believed that the MPLA's army was defending their security, while people in the parts of the countryside controlled by UNITA believed that UNITA was defending them against government forces that were a threat to their security.

Pearce was able to demonstrate that 'the Angolan war was never a conflict between communities of people defined on the basis of mutually incompatible prior interests' (p.180); rather, it was about the pursuit of power by the two rival movements and their use of force to control territory and the resident populations. He, however, concludes that the question of national identity in Angola remained unresolved.

Overall, the book is a well-written piece. It is intellectually stimulating, providing a very insightful glimpse into the Angolan conflict. It is a major contribution to the study of conflict and identity formation. The author exhibits a deep familiarity with the relevant literature, which together with his interviews and reflections serve as material from which to weave a very interesting narrative. The book is a worthy piece that should be read by everyone interested in the study of conflicts in post-colonial Africa.