Angola is not unique in having witnessed the rise of several different conceptions of national identity within its borders in the period before independence, nor is it unique in that these different conceptions were associated with rival political movements. Angola is unusual, however, in that no one strand of nationalism became hegemonic in the decades following independence. This fact is inseparable from the reality that control of the Angolan population was divided between the MPLA state and the Unita rebels from 1975 until 2002. In this paper I will argue that 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 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. At the same time Unita, still negotiating its role as a political player following its military defeat, has stopped asserting its claims to an alternative nationalism. Debates around Angolan national identity nevertheless remain alive, albeit not in the arena of formal politics, and include more or less explicit challenges to the MPLA’s claims to exclusive nationalist legitimacy.

In considering the origins and the development of different nationalisms in Angola, we need to bear in mind the characteristics that nationalism had already assumed elsewhere in Africa at a time when anti-colonial activity in Angola had barely begun. The first of these is the fact that African nationalism was, and still remains, bound up with ideas of anti-colonial liberation. For years after independence, the memorialisation of independence struggles has continued to be an important political tool for governments to assert their nationalist legitimacy. Second, in the African context, nationalism almost always refers to an ideology that asserts the primacy of identities based on a state that has taken its borders
from a former colony. In independent Africa, we might further see nationalism as an ideology that puts a high value on national unity, and which may be suspicious of ethnic or regional claims to identity, or which might seek to accommodate these claims within a broader definition of nationalism. Nationalist movements present themselves as the guardians of the unity of a nation against forces – be they real or imagined – that would seek to divide it.

The strong association in Africa between nationalism and anti-colonial liberation has given nationalism a normative character that is hard to attack. Moreover, when we do consider challenges to nationalism, we need to be mindful of whether what is going on is indeed the promulgation of ideologies other than nationalism, or rather a challenge to the nationalist claims of the incumbent government: not attacking nationalism, but continuing to assert the positive value of nationalism while undermining the claims of others to be nationalist, by accusing supposedly nationalist incumbents of being in fact the representatives of fractional interests. I would suggest that the latter response is the more useful reference point when we seek to understand the political role of nationalism in Angola throughout the civil war, and still today. We need to look at different claims to nationalism – the different imaginings of the community called the nation, as Benedict Anderson would have it – and to what extent these nationalisms assert their exclusivity, or admit the possibility of a more plural, accommodating kind of nationalism.

Elsewhere in this book, David Birmingham notes that today, none of the three former liberation movements in Angola seems to embody the concept of nationalism, at least in the public consciousness: “Each was associated with the greed of a small élite”. In the introduction to another 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 than from any legitimacy attached to its success in having defeated its anti-colonial rivals.

In a chapter in the same volume, Christine Messiant suggests that there exists in Angola a new sort of nationalism centred on the MPLA:

---

2. See Birmingham in this volume, p. 228.