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Justin Pearce

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## Introduction

‘I used to be a member of UNITA. But now I’m a member of the government.’

‘Why are you a member of the government?’

‘Because I am here with the government.’

These words were spoken by a young woman in Mavinga in 2002, a few months after the Angolan government signed a peace accord with the *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA), its adversary in a war that had lasted since before independence in 1975. What she said disrupted a lot of what I thought I knew both about Angola and about the politics of civil conflict. A thousand kilometres from Luanda, Mavinga and its surrounds had always had a peculiar relationship with successive attempts to govern Angola. The Mavinga that I saw in 2002 comprised the neatly aligned ruins of brick and concrete buildings that marked out a single broad street through the dust, bordered with the dry stumps of what had once been orange trees. This urban planning was the legacy of a Portuguese administration that had viewed the south-east as ‘*as terras ao fim do mundo*’, the lands at the end of the earth. For UNITA, which had dominated this region throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Mavinga had been part of ‘*as terras livres de Angola*’, the free lands of Angola, despite being a long way from the Central Highlands that are generally regarded as UNITA’s political heartland. Even now, the slogan ‘*Viva o Doutor Savimbi*’ remained daubed on the wall of a roofless hospital building. For the ruling party, the *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola* (MPLA), Mavinga had been one of the last places where the state established a presence, in 2001, a quarter of a century after the MPLA had officially taken control of an independent Angola. A year later, that state was visible in Mavinga in the figure of a single policeman and a poster of President José Eduardo dos Santos plastered alongside the UNITA graffiti on the shrapnel-spattered hospital wall.

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Even when the state had planted its flag in Mavinga, the town became no more than an outpost in enemy lands. The UNITA detail had fled ahead of the advancing government forces, taking the civilian population with it. In the ensuing months, the Angolan Armed Forces (FAA) went forth from their new base, rounding up anyone who was living in the bush and who might therefore be suspected of supplying food or labour to UNITA. Among them was the woman who was now telling me her story. She spoke of having spent most of her life with UNITA, whose soldiers had ‘caught’ her from her home village in Moxico province further north. Then in the last month of the war, the government troops had ‘caught’ her and brought her to Mavinga. The meaning of her words was more complex, and more puzzling, than her casual tone suggested. We think of a ‘member’ of a rebel movement as someone who bears arms. Membership of a movement whose reputation, by 2002, was as unpleasant as that of UNITA was hard to attribute to this gently spoken woman who smiled at my naive questions. Even more puzzlingly, to switch one’s allegiance between two movements whose mutual enmity had defined twenty-seven years of war was never supposed to sound as effortless and as unproblematic as she suggested. When she described herself as a ‘member’ of the government, of course, she was not suggesting that she was a member of the executive. What was clear was that she now considered herself in some sense to belong to the government and that this belonging was of the same nature as the sense of belonging that she had previously felt to UNITA. What is more, her sense of being a ‘member’ of the two movements in succession seemed, in her reckoning, to be consistent with being ‘caught’ by UNITA many years ago, and ‘caught’ by the government more recently.

These questions about political and national identities among the people of the Angolan Central Highlands and their relationship to political power are the central concern of this book. The implications of what my interviewee in Mavinga said did not so much challenge existing writings on the Angolan conflict as suggest new directions that had been ignored by scholarly research and by journalism alike. While a reasonable historical literature exists on colonial Angola and the foundations of Angolan nationalism from the 1950s onwards, serious studies of the decades after independence are rare. The themes that writers explored in relation to colonial-era Angola – the agency of rival Angolan elites and the formation of national, sub-national and political identities among the population at large – disappear abruptly from the literature from the moment of Angolan independence.<sup>1</sup> The literature that exists

<sup>1</sup> A welcome recent exception to this silence, though not directly concerned with the conflict in the Central Highlands, is the emerging literature on the previously suppressed subject of the divisions within the MPLA that led to the uprising of 27 May 1977 and

concerning this period is preoccupied with the relationship between Angola and the wider world and has largely overlooked the question of people's participation in the war and their relationship to the dominant political movements, a question that I address in the central chapters of this book.

Many accounts of the conflict after 1975 portray it as the enactment on a southern African stage of the global rivalry between the Cold War superpowers or as a manifestation of apartheid South Africa's efforts to defend white rule. This interpretation is based on the fact of the South African invasion as the Portuguese withdrew from Angola in 1975, the military and technical assistance that Cuba provided to the MPLA state from 1975 onwards, and the renewed South African intervention in support of UNITA in the 1980s alongside military assistance from the Reagan administration in Washington. Wright emphasises US support for UNITA as part of a strategy aimed at blocking Soviet influence in Africa and ultimately at securing global hegemony for a US-led capitalist system.<sup>2</sup> Wright draws conclusions about the MPLA and UNITA on the basis of their international connections but says little about their engagement with Angolan society. Minter's study, emphasising the South African role, is more even-handed. He concludes that although external intervention did not cause the conflict in Angola, it lengthened and deepened it. He notes that while UNITA used both persuasion and force in gathering support, research difficulties had hindered the examination of questions of mobilisation.<sup>3</sup> Cold War involvement in Angola received fresh attention in the early 2000s as newly available materials from both Western- and Eastern-bloc archives stimulated historical research into the impact of the superpower rivalry on state formation and political contestation in developing countries.<sup>4</sup> While this generation of literature provides important information

subsequent killing of thousands of government opponents. Dalina Cabrita Mateus and Álvaro Mateus, *Purga em Angola: Nito Alves, Sita Valles, Zé Van Dunem, o 27 de Maio de 1977* (Lisbon, 2007); Lara Pawson, *In the Name of the People: Angola's Forgotten Massacre* (London, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> George Wright, *The Destruction of a Nation: United States' Policy Toward Angola since 1945* (London, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> William Minter, *Apartheid's Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique* (London, 1994), 217.

<sup>4</sup> Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington and Africa 1959–1976* (Chapel Hill NC, 2002); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York, 2007); Stephen Ellis, *External Mission: The ANC in Exile, 1960–1990* (London, 2012); Jamie Miller, 'Things Fall Apart: South Africa and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire, 1973–74', *Cold War History* 12.2 (2012), 183–204; Jamie Miller, 'Yes, Minister: Reassessing South Africa's Intervention in the Angolan Civil War, 1975–1976', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15.3 (2013), 4–33; Piero Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria and the Struggle for Southern Africa 1976–1991* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2013).

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about the motivations and strategies both of the superpowers and of smaller international players such as Cuba and South Africa, it is less concerned with political visions and agency in the countries that were on the receiving end of intervention.

Some writers have acknowledged the limitations of focussing on external intervention. Guimarães notes that political cleavages in Angola were formed before the Cold War rivals arrived.<sup>5</sup> Heywood, while mindful of foreign intervention, argues that to see the Cold War as the main driver of conflict in Angola ‘misses the more dynamic domestic perspective’ (186) and ignores the agency of Angolan actors, notably the choice by UNITA’s leader, Jonas Savimbi, to accept American and South African assistance in order to advance an agenda that she sees as having Ovimbundu nationalism at its heart: ‘The war became both a civil war between Angolan nationalists and a proxy war between Cold War enemies’ (200).<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the internal dynamics of the conflict between 1975 and 1991, in particular the question of the relationship between elites and the broader Angolan population, remain relatively neglected by researchers, and this is one of the lacunae that this book sets out to address.

The understanding of the Angolan conflict as a product of the Cold War paralleled the diplomatic orthodoxy of the period. That same orthodoxy was the premise of the Bicesse peace accord in 1991 and the elections of 1992: an arrangement that arose not from any initiative from Angolan society but as a response by political actors outside Angola to a complex series of changes in the international balance of military and political power. By 1993, the Angolan war had resumed in a more destructive form than ever before. In line with a broader turn in the scholarship on warfare after 1990, writers on Angola turned their attention away from political considerations and towards the economic activity that provided the material conditions for conflict, above all, UNITA’s domination of diamond mining. Malaquias views this period as confirming UNITA’s transformation from a guerrilla movement into a ‘criminal insurgency’.<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that accounts of the period reduce the war simply to looting. Le Billon, for example, recognises the need to consider politics as well as the effects of resource endowment in determining the course of

<sup>5</sup> Fernando Andresen Guimarães, *The Origins of the Angolan Civil War: Foreign Intervention and Domestic Political Conflict* (Basingstoke, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Linda Heywood, *Contested Power in Angola: 1840s to the Present* (Rochester, NY, 2002). The Ovimbundu are the ethnolinguistic group associated with the Central Highlands.

<sup>7</sup> Assis Malaquias, *Rebels and Robbers: Violence in Post-Colonial Angola* (Uppsala, 2007). See also Jakkie Cilliers and Christian Dietrich (eds.), *Angola’s War Economy: The Role of Oil and Diamonds* (Pretoria, 2000).

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the war.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, not only did the sudden shift in perspective serve to obscure the longer history of the Angolan conflict, but the ‘resource war’ paradigm also helped ensure that questions about political mobilisation remained largely absent from research on Angola as the end of the century approached, a fact that was compounded by researchers’ difficulties in gaining access to the Angolan interior before the end of the war in 2002. My treatment of the 1990s in this book involves addressing the same questions about political mobilisation in Angola that I raise first with respect to the Cold War period. I also investigate the continuities in ideologies and identities between the two periods, which the existing literature deals with, in essence, as two separate episodes of conflict.

## THE ANGOLAN CASE IN CONTEXT

Having sketched the main trends in the existing literature on Angola’s recent history, I turn now to developments in the theoretical and comparative literature on conflict that have informed my perspectives on the Angolan war. Any study of late-twentieth-century Angola needs to take into account the burgeoning of conflict studies as a sub-field within a number of social science disciplines since 1990, as scholars sought to explain the persistence of violence in developing countries in the post–Cold War world. Kaldor’s influential concept of the ‘new war’ links an emphasis on the role of commodities in sustaining warfare to forms of supranational and sub-national solidarity that served to weaken the nation state ‘from above and from below’.<sup>9</sup> Clapham and Reno, among others, have used the concept of the ‘warlord’, a military leader who controls territory by force of arms not for political ends but in order to extract tribute from economic activity, typically mining, logging or narcotics.<sup>10</sup> For Clapham, a warlord insurgency ‘is directed towards a change of leadership which does not entail the creation of a state any different from that which it seeks to overthrow, and which may involve the creation of a personal territorial fiefdom separate from existing state structures and boundaries’.<sup>11</sup> Reno links the warlord phenomenon to the loss of state security guarantees since the end of the Cold War; he observes how the rulers of weak states privatise security

<sup>8</sup> Philippe le Billon, ‘Angola’s Political Economy of War: The Role of Oil and Diamonds, 1975–2000’, *African Affairs* 100.398 (2001), 55–80.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge, 1998), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Clapham (ed.), *African Guerrillas* (Oxford, 1998); William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, CO, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Clapham, *African Guerrillas*, 7.

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and turn state resources to their own material benefit, to the point where the line between weak state ruler and warlord becomes indistinct.

The link between natural resource endowment and conflict has also become the principal theme in a body of econometrically based research, of which the work of Collier and Hoeffler is best known.<sup>12</sup> The questions addressed by these quantitative studies have been framed in terms of the material conditions that create an incentive for taking up arms and guarantee the viability of a rebel military force. This body of literature views politics as epiphenomenal and sees desire for material gain as the main driver of conflict. Literature within this tradition has nevertheless more recently taken a ‘political turn’ and analysed independent variables concerning the character of the state and other institutions. This later wave of research still assumes a causal relationship between mineral endowment and conflict but seeks more sophisticated ways of articulating it.<sup>13</sup>

A further body of literature on civil war that emerged after 1990 addresses questions concerning the human motivation for becoming involved in conflict. Much of this literature frames itself explicitly against what it sees as the economic determinism of the quantitative studies of civil war. Sociological and anthropological studies of conflict have looked for forms of social solidarity outside of the state, on the assumption that the state was in retreat. They examine the construction of new identities and loyalties at the sub-national or supra-national level, including, for example, those framed in terms of messianic religious adherence in the case of Uganda or economic marginalisation and globalised youth culture breaking down older patterns of social order in the case of Sierra Leone.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, ‘On Economic Causes of Civil War’, *Oxford Economic Papers* 50.4 (1998) 563–573; Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, ‘Greed and Grievance in Civil War’, *The Centre for the Study of African Economies Working Paper Series* (Oxford, 2000); Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler et al., ‘On the Duration of Civil War’, *Journal of Peace Research* 41.3 (2004) 253–273.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Englebert and James Ron, ‘Primary Commodities and War: Congo-Brazzaville’s Ambivalent Resource Curse’, *Comparative Politics* 37.1 (2004), 61–81; James Ron, ‘Paradigm in Distress? Primary Commodities and Civil War’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49.4 (2005), 443–450; Jeremy Weinstein, ‘Resources and the Information Problem in Rebel Recruitment’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49.4 (2005), 443–450; Richard Snyder, ‘Does Lootable Wealth Breed Disorder? A Political Economy of Extraction Framework’, *Comparative Political Studies* 39.8 (2006), 943–968; Edward Aspinall, ‘The Construction of Grievance: Natural Resources and Identity in a Separatist Conflict’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51.6 (2007), 950–972.

<sup>14</sup> On Uganda, Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda 1986–87* (Oxford, 1999); Ruddy Doom and Koen Vlassenroot, ‘Kony’s Message: A New Koine? The Lord’s Resistance Army in Northern Uganda’, *African Affairs* 98 (1999), 5–36; on Sierra Leone, Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone* (Oxford, 1996); David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford, 2005); Krijn Peters, *War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone* (Cambridge, 2011).

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Despite the profound differences in intention and methodology across the range of research on civil war that has been done since 1990, two common shortcomings become apparent when the Angolan case is brought into consideration. I will consider these in turn here in order to demonstrate the changes in perspective that are required by a study of wartime Angola. First among these shortcomings is a tendency to overlook questions of state making and nation building. The concern with the post–Cold War present has confined researchers to a common narrative about the erosion of the state and its associated national identities. Yet at an early stage of my research in Angola, it became clear that the idea of nation building was central to how people understood their affiliation to the MPLA, to UNITA or their lack of affiliation to either movement, from the 1970s until the new century. Ideas about nation building may have been articulated originally by elites associated with one or other political movement but became part of the framework of ideas through which people in towns and villages understood their relationship to a wider Angolan nation. The idea of Angola and their relationship to it, the building of an Angolan nation through processes of elite-led modernisation and their relation to this process were the pivot of how people constructed their own identity. Nationalism (or conflicting nationalisms) was a political tool for elites in making hegemonic the rule of a political movement. The elites' success in doing this was measured in the extent to which preferred ideas about the nation and the position of the political movement in the nation became part of the everyday currency of ideas among a population. Questions about political identity at a sub-national level proved thus to be inseparable from conflicting ideas about nation building. Several years into the twenty-first century, Angolans continued to express their political identity in terms of antagonisms that originated during anti-colonial struggles more than thirty years earlier. A perspective that emphasised state failure and the erosion of national identity would blind us to the fact that both for the MPLA and for UNITA, the conflict was about consolidating an Angolan national identity through a project of state building.

With this in mind, my perspective has been influenced by a turn taken by African historiography since the start of the present century quite separate from the literature that I have already discussed on civil war. I refer here to literature that has revisited African nationalism, finding its source material both in newly opened archives and in interviews with people old enough to remember liberation struggles and decolonisation.<sup>15</sup> After an earlier generation

<sup>15</sup> To give a few examples from a wide array of scholarship: Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor and Terence Ranger, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the 'Dark Forests' of*



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of nationalist historiography had become tainted as a result of its uncritical stance towards post-independence governments, the newer wave of research has examined currents of nationalist thought and mobilisation that did not contribute to the preferred genealogical narratives of ruling parties and which was consequently neglected or suppressed in earlier accounts. I do not intend to make value judgements about different nationalisms or to explore counterfactuals in which a party other than the MPLA controlled the Angolan state after independence but rather to acknowledge the existence and the political potency of multiple discourses of nationhood irrespective of their relationship to the state.

The second shortcoming that I identify with the post-1990 literature on conflict, whether quantitative or qualitative in method, is a tendency to see state and rebels as two things of a different nature. This is related to the first shortcoming, since ‘state’ and ‘rebels’ are defined in terms of the narrative of state decay and state destruction that I have noted. Explanations of civil war are sought through asking questions about the factors (be these economic, ideological or institutional) that facilitate rebel organisation or that weaken the state. Implicit in this is the idea that rule by a state, the unchallenged monopoly of violence in a bounded territory, is a normal condition.<sup>16</sup> Studies of civil war start from the premise that a rebellion is a phenomenon of exception that needs to be accounted for.<sup>17</sup> The inadequacies of such an approach should be evident as soon as the origins of the MPLA and UNITA and the history of people’s association with them are taken into account. When UNITA mobilised people, there was no ready-made historic grievance against the MPLA for UNITA to invoke. UNITA’s mobilisation efforts began before the MPLA had assumed power in Luanda. Even after the MPLA took control of the Angolan state, most of the people to whom UNITA addressed itself had

*Matabeleland* (Oxford, 2000); Heywood, *Contested Power*; David M. Anderson, “‘Yours in Struggle for Majimbo’. Nationalism and the Party Politics of Decolonization in Kenya, 1955–64”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 40.3 (July 2005), 547–564; Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya: Counterinsurgency, Civil War and Decolonization* (Cambridge, 2009); Timothy Gibbs, *Mandela’s Kinsmen: Nationalist Elites and Apartheid’s First Bantustan* (Oxford, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> ‘While Weber’s ideal type of the modern state has become hegemonic in the global system – when political elites speak, virtually everyone appears to assume, particularly after the end of the Cold War, that Weber’s kind of state is what the state should be – we have to realize that this ideal type describes political reality nowhere, not even in the developed “West”.’ Donald L. Donham, ‘Staring at Suffering’, in Edna Bay and Donald Donham, *States of Violence: Politics, Youth, and Memory in Contemporary Africa* (Charlottesville, NC, 2006), 20–21.

<sup>17</sup> See Roland Marchal and Christine Messiant, ‘Une lecture symptomatique de quelques théorisations récentes des guerres civiles’, *Revue Lusotopie* XIII.2 (2006), 3–46.



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never lived under the rule of the MPLA. In short, from the point of view of most of the people who were attached to UNITA, UNITA had been part of the political landscape for at least as long as the MPLA, and UNITA was the norm against which other possibilities would be evaluated; later I will examine how UNITA's own belief in its state-like status would be the cornerstone of the ideology on which it based its claims to legitimacy. Similarly, if we seek to explain the Angolan conflict in terms of a rebellion provoked by the presence of mineral resources, we have still to explain why UNITA was already well established as a political and military force long before the diamond trade became its main source of revenue in the 1990s. To try to account for the Angolan war by asking why UNITA rose up in rebellion against the MPLA, therefore, would involve several questionable assumptions. As Richards has suggested, we may learn more about conflict by concentrating on 'aspects of social process, rather than focusing exclusively on causes'. Richards emphasises the need to 'comprehend the practices of war and peace: how people mobilise and organise for war, and the role played by ideational factors in such mobilisation and organisation'.<sup>18</sup>

## ANGOLA AND THE NATURE OF POLITICAL BELONGING

The relationship between people and political movements in the Angolan civil war – the relationship idiosyncratically referred to as 'membership' by the woman in Mavinga – is the central concern of this book. She was not alone in implying that being a 'member' of UNITA and being a 'member' of the government involved essentially the same kind of belonging. Among the people I interviewed who had experienced the control of both UNITA and the Angolan government at different times during the war, many voiced opinions about the relative effectiveness of the MPLA and of UNITA as governing organisations or about the relative conditions of life under the control of one or the other. Yet contrary to the assumption by some scholars of a value-laden categorical distinction between state and rebels, most people in the Central Highlands saw the MPLA and UNITA as two entities of the same nature that had competed for popular allegiance. Neither one was, a priori, more worthy than the other. Some people had experienced UNITA above all as a violent, predatory movement, but others had suffered violence perpetrated by government soldiers or by both armies. At the same time, the positive qualities that typically reinforce the contract between states and citizens were not the

<sup>18</sup> Paul Richards, 'New War: An Ethnographic Approach', in Paul Richards (ed.), *No Peace, No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Conflict* (Oxford, 1996), 13.

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exclusive prerogative of the MPLA state. People in the towns of the Central Highlands had experienced the political control of UNITA for a brief period, followed by a much longer period of control and a more sustained project of state building by the MPLA. Yet for many rural people, UNITA was the only political movement that they encountered for at least fifteen years after independence. The nearest thing to a state that they knew consisted in UNITA's efforts at state building, and their sense of being part of a larger Angolan nation was constituted through ideas of a nation and its history as UNITA wished to see them.

If the categorisation of 'state' and 'rebels' poses one obstruction to understanding the political dynamics of the Angolan conflict, the binary of 'greed' and 'grievance' assumed by Collier and Hoeffler – the notion that conflict can best be explained either as an expression of grievance or as the pursuit of material gain – has created a further false dichotomy that has persisted even among scholars whose approach is more nuanced than Collier and Hoeffler's original treatment.<sup>19</sup> My approach here is that how a war is paid for and the ideologies and politics that shape people's allegiances are two different sets of questions, and my focus is on the latter. Some more recent studies have allowed that political grievance and material gain are both potential drivers of civil conflict but see them as mutually exclusive.<sup>20</sup> Yet the research presented in this book shows that external backing or resource endowment does not necessarily erode ideological commitment. The ideas about national liberation that UNITA used to command loyalty in the last years of colonial rule were no less significant to UNITA's followers after UNITA came to command support from the South African and United States governments and to make profits from international trade.

Other debates have revolved around the agency of people who participate in civil conflict or in whose name the conflict is waged. One debate concerns whether people join or support rebel movements because they recognise a common political interest with the rebels or because they are compelled to do so.<sup>21</sup> Kriger has noted a related debate within scholarship on peasants' participation in civil war, which she sees as being divided between 'voluntarist' accounts that emphasise the agency of participants and 'structuralist'

<sup>19</sup> See the critiques offered by Christopher Cramer, *Civil War Is Not a Stupid Thing: Accounting for Violence in Developing Countries* (London, 2006) and Stathis Kalyvas, 'The Ontology of "Political Violence": Action and Identity in Civil Wars', *Perspectives on Politics* 1.3 (2003), 475–494.

<sup>20</sup> William Reno, *Warfare in Independent Africa* (Cambridge, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Clapham, 'Introduction: Analysing African Insurgencies', in Christopher Clapham (ed.), *African Guerrillas* (Oxford, 1998), 14.