

Negotiating Post-war Identities

Child Soldiers in Mozambique and Angola

by Alcinda Honwana¹

Angola and Mozambique were both Portuguese colonies that, after a long period of armed struggle for national liberation, acceded to independence in 1975. Both post-colonial governments adopted a Marxist orientation and socialist model of development. After independence opposition parties (Mozambique National Resistance-RENAMO in Mozambique- and United Front for the Total Liberation of Angola- UNITA in Angola) initiated a war against the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO) and Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) governments.

It is in the process of these wars, which lasted for several years (more than 15 years in Mozambique and more than 20 in Angola), that many children were drawn into armed conflict as active combatants.

Child Soldiers: A worldwide Phenomenon

The issue of child soldiers is not unique to Mozambique and Angola. Many other African countries, such as Uganda, Sierra Leone, Congo, Liberia, and Algeria, at war feature young combatants. This phenomenon is not peculiar to Africa. Historically young people have been at the forefront of political conflict in many parts of the world. For instance in Europe in Middle Ages and nowadays in places such as Cambodia, Yugoslavia, Palestine, Northern Island and Afghanistan.

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Child Soldiers in Post-Colonial Conflicts in Africa

The issue of child soldiers cannot be explained in terms of Africa's pre-colonial military history, nor does it have its roots in African traditional culture. Rather, the phenomenon is rooted in the crisis of the post-colonial state in Africa. This crisis is reflected in ethnic conflicts over power sharing, identity and access to resources; in the incapacity of the state to provide for and protect its citizens; and in the collapse of social and economic structures in rural areas and the massive migration to urban areas. The development of armed conflicts into which youth and young people are drawn is a direct symptom of such a crisis. In the case of Mozambique and Angola this crisis was exacerbated by external pressures, the South African apartheid regime's destabilization through direct support of rebel movements. During the war, many youths become vulnerable to recruitment due to lack of opportunities in the countryside. In addition, internal issues such as ethnic alliances and a general disenchantment with the state over rejection of traditional authorities and traditional cultural values determined the positions taken by some traditional chiefs, who helped to recruit youth and children to join the rebel forces. Many children and youth also volunteered to join either the government or the rebels as soldiers. For many the possession of an instrument of coercion was often the only access to food and to a sense of power. In the aftermath of the war many of these youths continue to be vulnerable; they have no skills, no jobs and no education (many had to go back to primary school next to small children half their age). The economic situation in the countryside did not improve: Extreme poverty, lack of infrastructure (hospitals, schools), and difficult environmental conditions such as El Nino continued.

This is the situation of many villages to which the young soldiers return, communities physically devastated by the war and with profound social wounds. These are the dilemmas that face youth and children of war in the post-colonial state.

Experiencing War and Violence

The number of children who have been directly exposed to war as combatants in Angola and Mozambique is enormous. It is estimated that more than 9,000 children in Angola and between 8,000 and 10,000 in Mozambique, participated in the conflicts as soldiers. Both RENAMO and UNITA were active in recruiting children to their armies. There are also accounts of the use of children in the government forces in the two countries, although to a lesser extent. Children were used to carry weapons and other equipment on the front lines, in reconnaissance missions, in mining, in espionage, and so forth. This systematic preference for children as soldiers was often based on assumptions that children are easier to control and manipulate, are easily programmed to feel little fear or revulsion for their actions and are easily programmed to think of war and only war. Children are also believed to possess excessive energy that can be used; once trained they carried out attacks with greater enthusiasm and brutality than did adults.

Recruitment into violence

Children were taken from school, from their homes, and from the street directly to military camps for training. Many were kidnapped during military attacks on villages as well as in road ambushes. Many children also joined the army (both the government and the rebel) for protection, food, opportunities to loot and a sense of power with a gun in their hands.

In Mozambique in certain areas of the country many youths became attracted to RENAMO, especially due to the crisis in the countryside. Many youths migrated to town and returned to rural areas unable to find work.

In 1984 the Operacao Producao returned back to the countryside those considered "unproductive". These returned youth could no longer fit in with local

structures and the unattractive life in rural areas. To these disconnected youth RENAMO offered a different purpose in life by putting a gun in their hands.

In Angola, many children pointed to insecurity, vulnerability, boredom and lack of food as some of the reasons that drove them to volunteer. Particularly important was the sense of security and power that the possession of a gun seems to provide. In Angola there was direct involvement of the traditional authorities in the recruitment of child soldiers. There were cases in which parents had to give their young boys to the *soba*², who would then send them to UNITA. Political and ethnic alliances may also have played a role in this because not everyone had to act in this way. Some *sobas*, some parents and even youths might have decided to take that course of action because, according to their own convictions, that was the right thing to do.

The process of becoming a soldier and part of the rebel movement happened through a direct encounter between the rebels and the children and their families or was mediated by local chiefs. In southern Mozambique the latter seems to have been less common, although there are accounts of local chiefs who supported the rebels or the government. However, the extent to which they had a direct hand in recruiting young combatants is not clear. In other areas of the country (central and northern region) there are reports of a stronger link between traditional authorities and the rebels. Both processes seem to have occurred in Angola and Mozambique.

The repercussion of the breakdown of social and economic structures in the countryside and of ethnic divisions and conflicts illustrate some of the complexities that shape the politics of power and identity in the post-colonial state.

Being in the War: Initiation to Violence and Terror

The process of training was aimed at preparing these children to fight a war and commit terrible atrocities. Heavy psychological pressure was placed on them. Military training in these particular conditions constituted a process of initiation to violence, marked by cutting the links of the children with society and programming them to think of war and only war. These seem to have been a deliberate policy to dehumanise the children and turn them into killing machines.

Once under training, discipline was very harsh, and the penalty for failed escape was execution. Sometime recruits were given their first military assignment: to kill a colleague who had tried to escape. To save one's own life, that order had to be carried out. Other times the child soldiers were urged to suck and drink the blood of the person they had just executed. This was aimed at making them be fearless and not feel remorse for the atrocity committed.

Some young soldiers pointed out that the commanders were also submitted to treatments by "kimbandas"³ to defend themselves against death. Some used "mufuca" (a tail of an animal prepared with remedies). In situation of danger they had to shake the "mufuca" to protect them.

Some of them were forced to kill their own relatives, raid and loot their own villages, or kill their neighbours. The suppression of close relatives seems to have been part of the strategy to create an insurgent force of youth. If the relatives of the kidnapped children were also in camp they would be killed in the child's presence, precisely to cut the links and eliminate the desire to escape and join the family. In other instances, RENAMO soldiers would go out and look for relatives of these children and kill them in their villages.

It was common practice to give the children new war names. Most of them received new names and were forbidden to use their birth names, traditional names

² Traditional authority.

³ Witchdoctors

or nicknames that were related to their past experiences with family, relatives and neighbours. These new names were constructed to enhance their combative morale and performance, such as the “the strong”, “Rambo”, “the invisible”, “Russian”, or “the powerful”, or they were just ordinary names but different from the birth names.

Especially in Angola, many children mentioned the fact that on certain evenings they were forced to sing and dance non-stop the whole night through. This practice was aimed at not allowing the soldiers to think of home, their parents, brothers, sisters, or friends. They had to be busy all the time. Some children in both countries also reported the use of hallucinogenic. Many Angolan children said that marijuana was used in some camps and that they also ate bullet powder to be strong.

The hard military training to which these children were subjected, together with the elimination of close relatives or persons to whom they could relate; the use of hallucinogenic, and the changing of their birth names were a power initiation to violence and terror. They were brainwashed and subjected to the most violent psychological pressures to make them shed their previous identities and assume new ones, as merciless killers. They had become completely dependent on and subservient to their mentors. They appear to have committed the most cruel war atrocities.

This raises the question, what is the agency of these children in these processes? Should we consider them passive agents, empty vessels into which the capacity for violence has been poured? Many of the children were forced to join the military and were cut off from society. Many among them came from completely dispossessed and impoverished communities, which offered no hope for the future. As previously mentioned, during the war for many of them the possession of a gun was often the only access to the bare necessities of life, through looting and the capacity to threaten others and exercise some degree of power and control. Because they were so vulnerable, the children were instrumentalized and turned into killing machines. Nevertheless, some children might have exercised their own agency and consciously decided to commit atrocities that went well beyond their regular military assignments, out of vengeance, greed, immaturity, jealousy, and the like, or in the expectation of being rewarded or positively acknowledged by commanders. Some might have also found some thrill from and enthusiastically participated in the process.

Michael de Certeau (1984) establishes an important distinction between strategies and tactics. He sees strategies as having long-term consequences or benefits, and tactics as means devised to cope with concrete circumstances even though those means are likely to have deleterious long-term consequences. Applying de Certeau’s distinction, it seems that these young combatants exercised what could be called a tactical agency” to maximize the circumstances created by the constraints of the military environment in which they were forced to operate. Many had no prospect of returning home after raiding, and burning villages, killing defenceless civilians, and looting food convoys. This was the life they were constrained to live, both in the years of age when they were abducted from their families and initiated into violence and terror. A few years down the line, that was all they knew life to be about, and many have tried to make the best of it. In this sense they were conscious “tactical” agents who had to respond to the demands and pressures of their lives. The exercise of a “strategic” agency would imply a long-term consequence of seeing the results of their actions concretised in some form of political change, which does not seem to be the case for the majority of the child soldiers.

The Quest for Reconciliation and Healing

With the end of armed hostilities most child soldiers were taken to demobilization centres. Through the help of the Red Cross and other local and international organizations many were reunited with their relatives or placed in foster care. In Mozambique, the first group of child soldiers that came from the RENAMO camps was placed in a recuperation centre in town, and a group of child psychologists worked with them. That experience proved to be unsuccessful because the children were completely removed from their community and cultural environment and were asked to talk about their painful memories as a way of healing. Such methods are common in Western psychological approaches. Western definitions and understandings of distress and trauma, of diagnosis and healing and of childhood were applied to a society that possesses very different ontologies and social and cultural patterns.

In other social cultural context a great deal of importance is placed on the role that the ancestral spirits and other spiritual forces play in the processes of causation and healing of mental health problem. Also, unlike modern Western psychology, the emphasis is placed not only on the person but also on the collective body. In this context the exclusive focus on the individual would undermine family and community efforts to be part of the healing process. Likewise, studies on healing war trauma in Mozambique have shown that recalling the traumatic experience through verbal externalisation, as a means to heal it is not always effective. In many instances people would rather not talk about the past, not look back; they want to start afresh after certain ritual procedures, which do not necessarily involve verbal expression of the affliction, have been performed.

Beyond Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

In Mozambique and Angola and in other conflict zones, especially in Africa, the vast majority of children we are dealing with today were born during the war. The armed conflict in Mozambique lasted more than 15 years, and in Angola more than 20 years. Thus for these children trauma is not post, but rather current and very much part of the everyday life.

In Mozambique and Angola there are local ways of understanding war trauma: In both countries people believe that war-related psychological trauma is directly linked with the anger of the spirits of the dead killed during the war. In southern Mozambique these spirits are called Mipfukwa, and they are believed to have the capacity to harm those that killed them or mistreated them in life. In Angola this is also a common phenomenon. All over the country people mentioned that the spirits of the dead had to be appeased so that peace could follow.

Social pollution constitutes an important factor in the context of post-war healing both in Angola and Mozambique. Pollution may arise from being in contact with death and bloodshed. Individuals who have been in a war, who killed or saw people being killed, are believed to be polluted by the wrongdoings of the war. They are seen as the vehicles through which the spirits of the dead of the war might enter and afflict the community. These spirits may afflict not only the individual who committed the offences but also the entire family or group. After the war, when soldiers and refugees return home, they are believed to be potential contaminators of the social body. The spirits of the dead, which might haunt them, can disrupt life in their families and villages. Therefore, the cleansing process is seen as a fundamental condition for collective protection against pollution and for the social reintegration of war affected people into society.

Not everybody performs cleansing and purification rituals or rituals to appease the spirits. Such practices are common in the rural areas, although some people might still perform them in urban settings. The availability of health care alternatives and religious and political affiliations determine the ways in which people make decisions concerning treatment of war trauma.

Rituals performed for former child soldiers are aimed at dealing with what happened during the war. An acknowledgement of the atrocities committed and subsequent break from that past is articulated through ritual performance. There are different types of rituals. Some are addresses to those who have participated in the war but did not kill; others are particularly directed to those who killed other people. The latter are more complex and require the expertise of a traditional healer. It is believed that the spirits of the dead can make the killer become insane.

In all these rituals is the idea of pollution that the children bring to their homes and villages. They have to be cleansed as soon as possible to be able to socialize freely with relatives and friends. Another important issue that comes out of these cases is the idea of symbolically breaking with the past: the washing of the body in the river so that the dirt of the war would go away; the burning of the hut and the clothes brought from the war. It is interesting to see the use of a chicken in the rituals (the blood for cleansing, and the meat for the sacrificial meal shared with the ancestors), and of herbal remedies to cleanse the body internally (inhaling and drinking) and externally (bathing and rubbing). In these cases to separate body and mind does not work because individuals are seen as a whole body/mind composite and as part and parcel of a collective body (their wrongdoings can affect their families as well). This explains the direct involvement of the family (both the living and the dead, the ancestors) in the cleansing and healing process. The ancestors are believed to play a powerful role in protecting their relatives against evil and misfortune.

The performance of these rituals and the politics that precede them transcend the particular individual(s) concerned and involved the collective body. The family and friends are involved, and the ancestral spirits are also implicated in mediating for a good outcome. This shows how the living has to acknowledge the dead (the past), both the ancestors and the dead of the war, to carry on with their lives. The rituals were aimed at asking for forgiveness, appeasing the souls of the dead, and preventing any future afflictions (retaliations) from the spirits of the dead, in this way serving the links with that "bad" past.

Post-war identities are constructed with reference to the past. Through remembrance individuals and groups are linked with others: A person is represented as part and parcel of a chain of generations and a web of kinship relations that includes the ancestors. In this sense, memory becomes a "culturally mediated expression of the temporal dimension of experience, in particular of social commitments and identifications". Remembrance constitutes also an act of identity building. Identities constructed through remembrance can be both „negative“ and "positive". Negative identities are those from which the person wishes to escape and which originate in a past that he or she needs to control. This is clearly seen in the case of the child soldiers, who have to acknowledge and appease the dead of the war to avoid being haunted by them. Only through this unmasking and acknowledgment of the past can individuals in these circumstances create new identities. These new identities are not built on memories as such but rather on the rejection of all the links those memories reveal. That is why the clothes and all the things the child soldier brought from the war had to be burnt. A "positive" identity is one that links the individual to a past that he or she wishes to maintain and reinforce.

There is no doubt that these rituals are instrumental in building family cohesion and solidarity and in dealing with the psychological and emotional side of these children's problems. However, they return to a countryside that remains as poor as it was when they left, with no job opportunities and no vocational schools. Although in Mozambique the end of the armed hostilities gave rise to some degree of confidence and the economy is slowly showing signs of improvement, in Angola the war did not stop; UNITA troops continue to fight and recruit children in certain areas of the country. The situation of child soldiers in post-colonial conflicts on the African continent is intrinsically linked with the crisis in state politics of power, identity and access to resources. Community mechanism of healing, social rebuilding, and conflict resolution are important, but on their own they cannot be a solution to the basic problem.

Conclusion

It was precisely this crisis, which resulted from internal and external causes, which gave rise to political violence and armed conflicts into which children were drawn as soldiers. Forced recruitment was the most common process of entering the military. However, more complex incorporation process took place and these involved traditional leaders and sometime relatives. Voluntarily affiliations of minors with the armies also occurred in certain areas. Children's participation in these wars (especially in the rebel armies) involved a carefully devised process of initiation into violence and terror. During military training children were completely cut off from society and reborn with the new identity of merciless killers.

The children's tales of terror, violence, and survival are shared experiences that link all children involved in war, extending beyond local and regional communities. The experiences of child soldiers in Mozambique are very similar to those of Angolan child combatants. Despite having been instrumentalized, these children were not empty vessels into which violence was poured. I argue that they exercised a "tactical agency" to make the most of circumstances created by the constraints of the military environment to which they were confined. Children's experiences are related not just to war and violence but also to the processes of healing the "social wounds of war" in the aftermath of conflict. Both in Angola and Mozambique, and as society tries to reconstitute its social fabric, local rituals of healing and reconciliation and reintegration are organized and preformed by families and communities to rehabilitate these children of war. It is important to take into consideration local understanding of childhood, war trauma and the strategies people use to heal and reintegrate war-affected children.