

MORE THAN VIOLENCE: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO WARTIME BEHAVIOR

by Stephen C. Lubkemann



It is not surprising that war tends automatically to imply violence. Indeed in his influential treatise on the anthropology of violence, David Riches identifies warfare as nothing more than “violence that is subject to a certain level of organization.” (1986:24).

Analysts of war-torn societies are often consumed by two primary problems: how violence is organized, and how warscape inhabitants handle it. This narrow focus derives less from any empirical investigation, but rather from our pre-conceptions about violence as a determinant of warscape behavior and agency. Violence comes to be treated—either explicitly or by default—as the only concern of consequence to people in warzones. However, this seemingly self evident relationship between violence and war distorts our understanding of the social life and behavior of warzone inhabitants. This article, using fieldwork I carried out in Mozambique during civil war, illustrates this general assertion.

We tend to emphasize only certain capacities of violence—most notably its capacity to “unmake” and “undo,” to disorder, disorganize and destabilize—with little reference to its other possible effects. Most obviously the destructiveness of violence unmakes and takes away life, health, security and property. Similarly the implied violation of the will leads most analysts to interpret wartime migration as *forced* and *involuntary* (Kunz 1973, 1981; Richmond 1988; Indra 1999). Many analysts of warzones emphasize the capacity of violence to produce what Erikson (1995:8) has termed a form of “massive collective trauma” in which the social tissue of the community is damaged in a manner analogous to that of the tortured physical body (Suarez-Orozco and Robben 2000).

This overwhelming emphasis on violence’s capacity to unravel and destroy powerfully shapes how policy-makers, journalists, the broader public, and even many social scientists, think about social processes in war-torn regions¹. Particularly in recent wars, violence is depicted as both hyper-chaotic and incomprehensible. As Paul Richards notes, the predominant images in depictions of these so-

called “new wars” are often “epidemiological,” equating the spread of mass violence with the mindlessness and tenacity of a viral contagion (Richards 2004: 2-3), spilling back and forth across borders and “infecting” entire sub-regions. Cast as sites of uncontrollable and pervasive violence, warzones are viewed as “socially unstable places” in which historically constituted social relations and cultural meanings have been thoroughly “undone” by that violence.

In such “interrupted” societies the social processes and life projects that anthropologists might investigate elsewhere are assumed to have been either rendered irrelevant or suspended. Instead, coping with violence becomes the only social role and task for warzone inhabitants—or at least the only one that their social analysts acknowledge. In the process analysts tend to lose track of—or simply dismiss—all other potential motives that usually shape social behavior. People who are simultaneously “brothers,” “workers,” “neighbors,” and “elders” are recast in reductionist molds, either as “refugees,” whose only recognizable role is to flee violence, or as “combatants,” whose only analyzed role is to perpetrate violence; or as “victims,” whose only role of relevance is to suffer violence.

Case Study: Mozambique

In a study I conducted in Machaze District, in Mozambique, from 1994 to 2002, accounts of a decade and a half of experience with civil war reveal that warzone life was not shaped solely, or even predominantly, with reference to violence. While violence most certainly did play a role in shaping the experience of many Mozambicans who suffered through that country’s long civil war (1977-1992), for most of them violence—or the threat of violence—periodically punctuated their lives rather than continuously scripting them. War was thus not a matter of “all terror all the time.” Everyday social existence in Machaze District in wartime was not just a matter of coping with violence but centered as in peacetime on the pursuit of a complex and

multi-dimensional agenda of social struggles, interpersonal negotiations, and life projects.

Throughout the conflict, gendered, generational, and other forms of social struggle continued to orient behavior—migratory and otherwise. It is primarily with these “other struggles” in mind that individuals imagine, plot out, and enact wartime living. Moreover, this complex array of culturally-constituted social concerns and agendas often had very little to do with the macro-political interests usually taken as the ultimate reason for the armed conflict. In short, to those immersed in it for most of their lives, “war” was about much more than violence or its avoidance.

More specifically, gendered social interests and struggles, largely unrelated to the conflict’s macro-political dynamics, shaped a particular type of wartime behavior—“forced migration”—in Machaze District. “Forced migration” is described as determined by larger forces that are entirely external to refugees themselves, almost as a reflex to the ebb and flow of violence. In Egon Kunz’ description of refugee migration (Kunz 1973, 1981):

An inner self-propelling force is singularly absent from the movement of refugees. Their progress more often than not resembles the movement of the billiard ball: devoid of inner direction their path is governed by the kinetic factors of inertia, friction, and the vectors of outside forces applied on them (1973:131).

The billiard ball model eliminates the need to investigate what refugees actually think about their own predicament by reducing the interest of all “forced migrants” to a singular concern with survival. The model’s principal assumption is that in the face of sheer terror, violence somehow renders all “normal” concerns for engagement in ongoing, culturally-defined, social life-strategies virtually insignificant in shaping behavior. To extend Kunz’s analogy, there is little investigation of whether the “properties” of different balls might determine varying reactions to the cue’s force. Indeed, virtually all aspects of migration processes—directionality, socio-demographic composition, and timing—are to be explained by variation in forces that are external to, and unaffected by, the agency of migrants. In other words, the emphasis in this theory remains centered on the “cue” (i.e. “violence”) rather than the “ball” (i.e. on how the culturally constituted concerns and agendas of

those affected “force” individuals to migrate in particular ways).

In this case study, I demonstrate that patterns of wartime migration in Machaze district cannot be explained with reference to the politico-military dynamics of the Mozambican civil war nor solely in terms of people’s concern with avoiding violence. Rather wartime movement reflected the complex ways in which the inhabitants sought to realize culturally imagined life projects and re-configure social relations. Most particularly, I investigate how the ongoing struggle over how gendered social relations should be defined and configured played a major role in motivating and shaping patterns of wartime migration. By critically exploring how social concerns other than violence itself continued to inform a behavior (migration), often assumed to be most directly and thoroughly determined by violence, I am embarking on a broader critical interrogation of how violence should be positioned in our analysis of all warzone social processes.

Gendered Interests Shape Wartime Migration

Shortly after Mozambique achieved independence from Portugal in 1975, hostile neighboring apartheid regimes instigated a civil war that lasted almost fifteen years. Machaze was one of the earliest settings for this conflict. By late 1979 the area was fully embroiled in the war between the Rhodesian (and later South African) supported anti-government faction (RENAMO) and the government forces (FRELIMO). Estimates suggest that during the conflict between 40% and 70% of the population left the district for South Africa, Zimbabwe, or other internal destinations within Mozambique.

These movements were patterned in highly gender-specific ways. Throughout the war almost twice as many women as men remained in Machaze or in neighboring rural districts. By contrast, most adult Machazian men moved out of the district to the peri-urban areas in South Africa during the first few years of the conflict. To a large extent gendered differences in initial out-migration patterns reflected an attempt by both men and women to perpetuate their social, economic and reproductive strategies under politically or ecologically induced duress.

International migration has played a role in the organization of social life in Machaze for well over a century. Pre-war economies involved a social division of labor between female agricultural labor and male migratory cash-

earning labor. Male migration was virtually universal and was incorporated as an informal and yet strongly socially marked rite of male passage. The vast majority of men spent most of their migratory careers in South Africa. Moreover, international migration had long been the preferred strategy for dealing with the periodic intensifications in colonial labor recruitment and taxation (which the Portuguese levied only against men in this area). The flight of men to South Africa during the beginning of the war thus reproduced established models for dealing with coercive political authority.

Conversely, Machazian women's relocation within the district reflected their preference for rural destinations that allowed them to re-establish some form of subsistence agriculture. Few Machazian women had either the desire or the intention—at least early on in the conflict—to join male relatives in moving out of the district. Most women sought refuge in the densely vegetated interior of the district. Many found that they could cultivate improvised fields in relative safety in areas that were several days travel by foot from the government's communal villages. Believing that they could weather what most expected would be only temporary turmoil, women sought to pursue subsistence agriculture furtively in these isolated areas. Rather than building permanent new homes, most constructed temporary lean-to structures that could be hidden in the bush and quickly rebuilt if they were located and destroyed by marauding troops. Fields were intentionally kept small and cleared by hand (rather than through the more conventional and less labor intensive method of burning) in an effort to conceal their existence from military patrols.

Engendered migratory patterns early in the war are best

seen as attempts to reproduce ongoing social and economic strategies under conditions that, although novel in some respects, were in many ways imagined by the district's residents as analogous to periodic crises in the past. In this sense wartime migration in Machaze—at least initially—represents neither a drastic break with the past nor the new forms of innovation and improvisation that the war's persistence would eventually require.

Starting in 1981, severe drought gripped many parts of Mozambique, devastating agricultural production through three agricultural cycles and rendering basic subsistence a life and death struggle throughout most of the district. By some estimates over 100,000 Mozambicans from the south and center of the country died as a result (Human Rights Watch 1992: 102). As during earlier periods of famine, Machazians moved westward into the highlands near the Zimbabwean border.

Here in the border zone, households developed new cross-border subsistence strategies. A growing number of adolescent Machazian males in these households sought employment across the border in Zimbabwe. However, most Machazian women preferred to remain in Mozambique where greater land availability permitted them to continue to pursue subsistence agriculture. Thus, throughout the mid-1980s, for many Machazian households, the border between the countries became the crossroads for a furtive, yet vigorous form of "commuter migration" carried out by young men who found occasional work in Zimbabwe. These men still maintained continuous contact with their mothers and younger siblings living on the Mozambican side of the border and scratching out a difficult, but still largely self-reliant and independent existence based on subsistence agriculture.

During the late 1980s, new obstacles emerged that rendered these border strategies less viable.



Seeking control over the growing number of Mozambicans within its territory and ways to share the burden of supporting this population economically, the Zimbabwean government allowed the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to open Zimbabwe's first refugee camp (Tongogara) in 1984. At the same time the Zimbabwean military cooperated with Mozambican government forces in a military campaign along the border to crack down on insurgent forces. This action compelled many of the women who had remained settled in Mozambique to finally seek permanent refuge in Zimbabwe where most were forcibly interned in the new refugee camps.

The Woman's Perspective

Once they were interned in these refugee camps, many women deeply resented the loss of decision-making power and independence resulting from their inability to pursue subsistence agriculture. Other than a number of small communal gardens used by international NGOs for agricultural training programs, no subsistence agriculture was possible within the camp's crowded confines. Food and other relief supplies were distributed by international relief agencies to designated "household heads," each allocated an amount that corresponded to the reported number of "dependents" within the household. Many women who in Machaze had been largely self-sufficient were turned into 'dependents' by this system. In Machaze any married woman controlled the use of everything she produced in the fields in which she worked. Women controlled the distribution of food, usually providing for their own and their children's subsistence and for the sustenance of husbands and in-laws. However, in Tongogara, some women found that living in the same "household" with male relatives—husbands, brothers, fathers, or fathers-in-laws—or even with senior wives and mothers-in-law—resulted in a loss of this power to the "household head" who received humanitarian aid for the household as a whole.

If most Machazian women found refugee camps to be a less than desirable option for coping with wartime conditions, many of their spouses greeted the camps as nothing short of a godsend. During the mid-1980s many Machazian men who had fled to South Africa early in the war returned to help family members move into safer areas within Mozambique or across the border to the refugee camps established by the (UNHCR). After returning

alone to South Africa, many of these men continued to send financial support and maintained communication channels with their families in these "surrogate home bases."

The Man's Perspective

However the overwhelming majority of men in South Africa—regardless of whether they visited spouses and other relatives in the UNHCR camps in Zimbabwe, or otherwise sent them assistance—systematically resisted having family members, spouses in particular, join them in South Africa. By keeping dependents, particularly wives, in the UNHCR camps, Machazian men found they could continue pursuing long established life-course strategies that would have been far more difficult should their Mozambican wives join them in South Africa. The humanitarian aid provided in these camps reduced the costs of maintaining families much as subsistence production had done in Machaze. Subsistence cultivation in the South African townships, however, was impossible. The Vaal townships consisted of small houses and shacks, with tiny yards, generally less than ten square meters in area. Even small garden plots or animals were seldom seen. Many men thus argued that having a Machazian wife move to South Africa would drain their earnings because she would become a dependent.

However Machazian men's efforts to prevent their spouses from joining them in South Africa also stemmed from other interests that had little to do with the challenges of economic subsistence in the townships. Throughout the twentieth century, Machazian men's life strategies have depended on rather acute culturally prescribed asymmetries in gender relations that allowed men to exploit women's labor for their own benefit. Machazian men's gendered monopoly on (migration-based) sources of cash played an important role in their ability to control women's labor and foster relationships of female dependence on men. Most men were quite explicit about the importance of preventing their wives from migrating to South Africa in order to keep Machazian women unaware of ways of life that might prompt them to question the established gendered division of labor from which men benefited. As one man put it, "In Machaze there must always be suffering to live. Women must always suffer. If the women from Machaze come to South Africa they will become corrupt like the South African women are. They will always spend

money. Once you feed a dog from a plate it will never again eat off the floor.”

Preventing Machazian women from joining them in South Africa also allowed many men to take advantage of new social opportunities for relationships with South African women that would have been unfeasible otherwise. As the war in Mozambique intensified and eventually started to drag out for years, many Machazian men began to consider the possibility that they might never be able to reconstitute their lives back in Mozambique. For some, the war had disrupted their contact with family members in Mozambique. Even among those who had maintained contact, there was growing recognition that these life-strategies were less secure. Conjugal relationships with South African women became an increasingly attractive option for many men as a strategy of diversifying risk.

However, Machazian men were aware that South African women were not generally receptive to the idea of polygyny (having multiple wives) that was accepted in Machaze. Men also feared that the presence of a Machazian wife in South Africa might reveal that they were Mozambicans and ultimately subject them to deportation. Many had disguised their Mozambican identity from their South African partners, often claiming to be from the Giyani area in South Africa. Such identity management would have proven far more difficult if Machazian wives came to reside with them in South Africa. Finally, some men also feared that their Machazian wives would become discontented at discovering their South African counterparts and that *uloi* (witchcraft) would result from jealousy among their wives.

Consequently, most men went to considerable lengths to prevent their Mozambican wives from joining them in South Africa during the war. Some refused to respond to letters from spouses who requested assistance that would allow them to join their husbands in South Africa, sometimes under the pretext that they had never received these letters in the first place. Others provided dubious and misleading reasons why spouses should not come to South Africa, or else promised what eventually became indefinitely delayed assistance.

Prolonged War and Women's Social Fertility

The same strategies that allowed Machazian men to guard, and in some ways even enhance, their security and long-term social options had very different consequences for the Machazian women who remained in Mozambique or

Zimbabwe. In particular, prolonged spousal separation during the war had highly gender-differentiated effects on social life and reproductive strategies. In Machaze, fertility (i.e. having children) was one of the most important life-course objectives for both Machazian men and women to realize. Yet, while both Machazian men and women benefited from the status and assistance that children provided, women were far more dependent than men on children for their old-age security. Unlike women, older men did not have to rely solely on children because the social practice of polygyny allowed them to obtain the social and domestic support they needed by marrying additional—and much younger—wives. However, Machazian women had no such options and consequently could only rely on children for old age support since older widows rarely had any prospects for remarriage. In short, in Machaze a woman's fertility was much more critical to her old age security than it was for most men.

However fertility was gender-differentiated not only in terms of its importance to Machazian life-strategies but also in its temporality. The longer biological timeframe over which men could viably reproduce, coupled with cultural prescriptions that allowed Machazian men to have multiple wives, meant that men's fertility could span several decades—in fact virtually their whole lives². However, Machazian women relied solely on their own fertility in order to secure culturally-prescribed rights in children. Their own biology thus provided them with a window of opportunity for the social project of fertility that was thus far more temporally circumscribed than for men.

As spousal separations grew longer throughout the war, a growing number of Machazian wives faced a significant dilemma. Women could remain faithful to long absent or missing husbands but with the long-term consequence of having fewer or no children. Alternatively wives could have sex with men other than their long absent husbands, allowing them to bear the children that were essential to securing their future security. However, this latter option involved violating cultural prescriptions that made divorce more likely and placed their future claims on these children at risk because the lobola (bridewealth) that a husband's kin had paid to the wife's kin ensured the husband's right to the woman's offspring.

This dilemma grew more acute for more women over the course of the war's fifteen year duration—a period that represented for many Machazian women much

of the limited time-span to realize their own fertility in order to secure their future well-being and security. The duration of the war was even more significant when we consider the “fertility work” that most Machazian women aimed to accomplish in their lifetimes. Most women whom I interviewed expressed a desire for at least six children and were particularly concerned with having more than one son: “Three and three is good (three children of each gender) because then you will know that at least one will have concern for you in his heart when you grow old.”

Far from remaining passive, women who confronted this dilemma responded in a variety of different ways as the war wore on. For the vast majority of these women, having children was an overriding concern in the decisions they made about how to invest in and manage social relations. Ultimately no more than a handful of the women who spoke with me had apparently been willing to forgo their own biological fertility altogether during the war. A common strategy among the women, who remained in the communal villages in Machaze and were the most likely to be isolated from spouses for long periods throughout the war, was to establish conjugal relationships with government soldiers. Women explained that they favored such relationships for several reasons, one being that in relationships with soldiers they were less likely to be subjected to sanctions by their husband’s kin because these relatives feared the military.

For many of the women who confronted this dilemma, wartime decisions about where to relocate and with whom to resettle reflected their desire to escape the social vigilance, pressure, and disapproval that would hinder their attempts to engage in extra-marital unions allowing them to bear children. After the war had ended many of these Machazian women found their rights to children born out of wedlock contested by a returning husband or his relatives. Contingencies, such as prolonged absence, were often considered by “traditional authorities” who arbitrate most such disputes. However, even in the best cases, resolution generally required that a divorced wife repay some portion of the *lobola* (bridewealth) in order to maintain rights in some of her children. A woman’s relatives often proved reluctant to assist her with such costs, particularly if they felt that the woman engaged in liaisons or migrated against their wishes during the conflict. A number of such women who had never left Machaze itself during the war actually fled the district to the city of Chimoio *after* the civil war

was over in order to avoid such claims on their children. Many others who had resettled in Zimbabwe chose not to return to Machaze because of the same fear.

Re-thinking War as a “Social Condition”

The decision-making of warscape inhabitants is usually portrayed as a process that is dominated by an all-consuming concern with “basic survival,” largely unaffected by “higher order” needs, unshaped by culture, and uninformed by a past that is presumed to have been rendered irrelevant by the immediacy of terror. However, as the analysis above has sought to demonstrate, Mozambican migration decisions in wartime were continuously and complexly informed by multidimensional social agendas and culturally-constituted concerns—including the struggles over maintaining socio-economic autonomy, how to configure gendered relations and power configurations within marriage, and how to secure long-term life security through vital life projects such as child-rearing.

While acute violence plays an undeniable role in shaping the experience of warzone inhabitants, it usually punctuates the lives of warzone inhabitants periodically rather than continuously scripting them. This is particularly likely to be the case in prolonged wars that drag on for decades and span generations—as was the case in Mozambique—but also in a growing number of other persistent conflicts worldwide³—including the field sites of my current research in Liberia and Angola. While awareness of the potential for violence may lurk in the back of everyone’s minds and occasionally leap to the fore, during the long uneasy lulls that consumed most of their time over the course of fifteen years, the warzone inhabitants are not singularly consumed by a concern with violence. In fact, rather more of their time is spent focused on the challenges of everyday social and material existence. Thus, in Machaze, throughout most of the war, fields were tended, albeit more watchfully, firewood was gathered, albeit on paths walked more carefully, and children were raised, albeit more cautiously.

Ultimately if we want to understand the behavior and experience of warscape inhabitants, I argue that it is vitally important not to depict war as simply the sum of experiences of acute violence. Indeed, to construct depictions of war as a condition by merely stringing together episodes of acute violence is to misrepresent the actual conditions that warscape inhabitants confront—it is a dis-

tortion akin to that of the typical movie trailer that artfully misrepresents the pace and scope of a drama by stringing together the moments of most garish action while neglecting the more mundane bulk of the narrative.

My primary point is that all aspects of social existence in war are constituted often as much by the conduct of everyday social struggles and concerns as by the “problem of violence.” The lives of warscape inhabitants insist on being lived in their full social complexity rather than being suspended or recast in reductionist terms.

Consequently, anthropologists should take the realization of culturally-specified everyday, and strategic-life projects, rather than the “problem of violence,” as our primary analytical object and point of departure for investigating the experience and behavior of refugees and other warzone inhabitants.

(Footnotes)

¹ Africa in particular has become virtually synonymous with these “new wars” and the social existence of millions of its inhabitants as centered around and singularly determined by war-generated violence that seems thoroughly unpredictable, arbitrary, and irrational.

² By way of example I met several men whose sons (by different wives) had over 40 years of difference in their ages. In one remarkable case a man even had two great-grandchildren (children of a son of his eldest son) who were actually older than his own youngest child who had been born but a few months before I interviewed him!

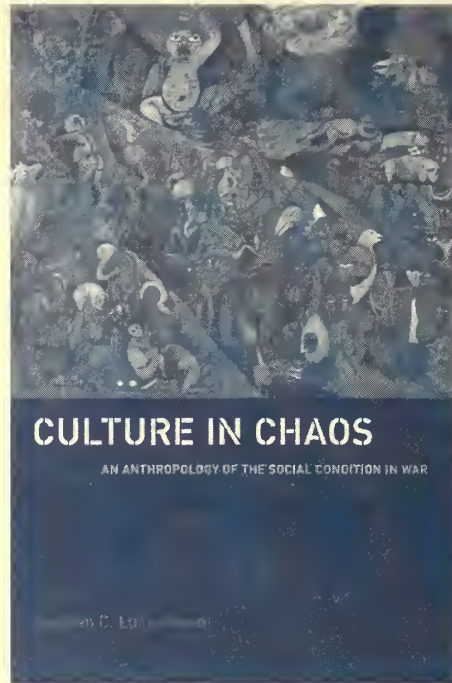
³ E.g. Angola, Sudan, Chechnya, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Chad, Colombia, Afghanistan, Burundi.

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Council for Museum Anthropology

Have you ever visited a museum and, looking at ordinary tools and scenes of living or at creations of art or archaeological remnants, found yourself deeply moved about your fellow humans in their infinite variety? Such "ah-ha!" experiences have evolved, for some of us, into serious dedication to museums as endlessly fascinating places of Culture and cultures.

Whether a professional or a part-time anthropologist who teaches, curates or writes in museum contexts, you should know that you have a friend and tutor—the professional support organization known as the Council for Museum Anthropology (CMA).

The Council is an all-volunteer membership group, a section of the American Anthropological Association, which fosters the development of anthropology in the context of museums and related institutions. It widely informs concerning cultural collections, exhibitions, outreach and theory in the field. In its publications, on-line and at annual meetings and special seminars, CMA addresses such ongoing concerns as representation of native peoples, care of collections and research support.

Members receive twice yearly the journal, *Museum Anthropology*; a monthly column of news and concerns in *Anthropology News*; and the new on-line weblog, <http://museumanthropologyblogspot.com>

For a sample, go to the weblog (above). You will see newsworthy museum stuff as well as scholarly articles previously published in *Museum Anthropology* and now under discussion. Current preoccupations range from "What is materiality?" to southwest African baskets and one of the MacArthur Award recipients, an Alaskan Native museum director.

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