Religion and Conflict Case Study Series

Angola and Mozambique: Healing and Social Reintegration

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Abstract
This case study takes a side-by-side look at the long civil wars in both Angola and Mozambique, and the ways in which religious beliefs and rituals—particularly of indigenous faiths—helped individuals and communities cope with and recover from the traumas caused by these conflicts. This case study addresses four primary questions: What were the causes of post-war trauma in Angola and Mozambique? What religious and indigenous beliefs informed local views of health and healing? What practices and religious rituals were used to overcome trauma? What is the relationship between national level efforts at reconciliation and local efforts of reconciliation and healing? Along with the core text, the case study also features a timeline of key events and list of recommended further readings.

About this Case Study
This case study was crafted under the editorial direction of Eric Patterson, visiting assistant professor in the Department of Government and associate director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

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Contents

Introduction 4
Historical Background 5
Domestic Factors 7
Conclusion 10

Resources

Key Events 11
Further Reading 12
Discussion Questions 13
In Mozambique and Angola, the majority of adults and children have lived most of their lives during periods of conflict and social unrest. The war between the ruling Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) lasted more than 20 years. Similarly, the Mozambican war between the government of the Frelimo Party (the successor to FRELIMO, or the National Liberation Front, an insurgent movement that had fought for Mozambican independence) and the opposition, the Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) lasted more than 15 years. For people in these countries, violence and trauma are not things of the past, but were rather current and very much part of everyday life.

The notion of violence should be understood well beyond the war itself—military attacks, landmines, and other situations directly related to the war. The notion of violence here is embedded in everyday life and touched on spheres like poverty, hunger, nudity, displacement, loss of dignity, and the like. How can a society deal with the violence and trauma? Indigenous therapeutic strategies and healing mechanisms such as the treatments and cleansing and purification rituals carried out by diviners, healers, and healing churches were often the only mechanisms available to cope with death, illness, distress, and suffering, and to restore health, peace, and harmony to the lives of individuals and groups in the postwar period.
Mozambique
The war in Mozambique started in 1977 with the creation of RENAMO in former Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) as a resistance movement against the Frelimo government. RENAMO was initially supported by the minority regime in Rhodesia, and later (after Zimbabwe's independence) by South Africa. This was one of the bloodiest wars in the region in which civilian populations were the principal targets. Although they also attacked government installations and the economic infrastructure, RENAMO fighters were notorious for their brutality and use of child soldiers. With its economy devastated and development projects paralyzed by the fighting between RENAMO and Frelimo's state forces, Mozambique became increasingly dependent on foreign aid. As a result, the government eventually decided to undertake far-reaching economic reforms, abandoning its former Marxist policies in favor of political and economic liberalization. In 1990, a new constitution was adopted, enshrining the principles of multiparty democracy. Furthermore, with its resources dissipated by years of war, the government was incapable of imposing a military solution to the conflict. RENAMO was also unable to sustain its war effort as South African support decreased following a process of internal reforms to end apartheid. With this military impasse, the possibilities of a political solution gained strength. Following several months of negotiations, the government and RENAMO signed a peace agreement in Rome in October 1992, and the first democratic elections took place in October 1994. Frelimo won these and formed a new government. In subsequent elections (1999, 2004, and 2009) Frelimo continued to renew its mandate, though at times by a very narrow margin.

The economic and social costs of the war in Mozambique were enormous. The consequences for the civilian population were catastrophic. Hundreds of thousands of Mozambicans died as a result of the war, and by 1989 about five million people were internally displaced, and more than one million became refugees in neighboring countries. Besides the many thousands of children who died as a direct consequence of the war, it is estimated that more than 250,000 children were either orphaned or separated from their families. School enrollment was reduced by an estimated half million, and medical facilities servicing approximately five million people were destroyed.

Angola
In Angola, UNITA was one of the movements that had fought colonial rule since the early 1960s, alongside the MPLA and the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA). After the 1974 coup in Portugal, which came to mark the end of the Portuguese colonial wars, the three Angolan nationalist movements engaged in a bitter internecine war to gain exclusive access to power with growing support by their respective Cold War allies. The MPLA emerged victorious, the FNLA faded in importance, and UNITA reconstituted itself with mainly US and South African support and continued its war against the MPLA government. UNITA portrayed itself as anti-Marxist and pro-Western, and at the height of the Cold War, the conflict directly involved South African and Cuban troops giving support to UNITA and the MPLA, respectively.

The first chance for peace came in May 1991 with the signature of a ceasefire agreement between the MPLA government and UNITA. This ceasefire held until the first democratic elections in September 1992, deemed free and fair by the international community. The MPLA won, but UNITA refused to accept the results. UNITA’s leader, Jonas Savimbi, ordered his troops to return to war, restarting full-scale conflict in October 1992. This brutal and intense war lasted until 1994 and took a heavy toll on the civilian population, especially children. In November 1994 a new peace agreement was signed in Lusaka between the government and UNITA. In April 1997, a government of National Reconciliation and Unity was established. But peace did not last long. In late 1998, following disagreements with the government, UNITA went back to war. The death of Savimbi in 2002 paved the way for a new era of peace in Angola.
to peace. A ceasefire agreement was signed between the two warring parties. The 2008 parliamentary elections resulted in an overwhelming majority for the MPLA.

Even before the renewed war at the end of 1992, the UN estimated that more than $30 billion had been lost during the Angolan conflict. Further, it was estimated that from 1992 to 1994, more than 100,000 people died from war-related causes; the number of land mine victims rose to 70,000; and by September 1994, about 1.2 million people were displaced. According to the 1997 United Nations Development Programme Report on Human Development in Angola, about 280,000 people were living in neighboring countries as refugees, and approximately 1.2 million Angolans were internally displaced. UNICEF statistics for 1993 indicate that nearly 840,000 children were living in difficult circumstances. The urban population rose by 50 percent in 1995.

For example, the town of Kuito, in the Bie province of Angola’s central plateau, was one of the most severely affected by the war between 1992 and 1994. Thousands of people lost their lives. Until 1997, many of those who died on the plateau remained there. Landmines prevented people from reaching the plateau to identify the dead and organize burial rituals. Many people in Kuito believed that things would not go well unless something was done to appease the dead and place them in the world of the spirits.
Religious Views of Health and Healing

In Mozambique and Angola, ancestral spirits constitute part of everyday life. It is believed that when an individual dies and the body is buried, the spirit remains as the effective manifestation of that individual’s power and personality. Thus, death does not constitute the end of an individual’s existence, but rather marks the transition to a new dimension of life. Spirits of the dead can take possession of a person’s body and operate through him or her, exercising a powerful influence over the living. The Supreme Being, or the Creator, constitutes a remote divinity, with no direct relationship with the community. Instead, people relate directly to the ancestral spirits with whom they share a combined existence and interact in everyday life. The ancestral spirits are believed to be real entities whose actions can interfere with the daily life of human beings in society. They are the ones who protect and guide the communities. They promote fertility of the land and of women, good agricultural production, good hunting, and good relations among members of the group. They also protect them against misfortune, disease, ecological dangers, and evil, namely witchcraft and sorcery. In short, the spirits care for the wellbeing of the communities.

However, the ancestral spirits can also withdraw their protection and create a state of vulnerability to misfortune and evil intentions, or even cause maladies to show their displeasure or anger with their descendants. They are believed to protect and give health and wealth to those who respect the social norms and punish those who disrespect them. Ill-health can also result from the interventions of malevolent spirits—those manipulated by witches and sorcerers—or by the spirits of bitterness—those of individuals wrongfully killed or not properly buried.

Communities venerate and worship the ancestral spirits through special rituals to propitiate them. In southern Mozambique, *ku pahla* means to venerate or to honor the ancestral spirits. *Ku pahla* is a permanent way of paying respect to one’s ancestors, and it is performed in multiple occasions such as the birth of a child, before harvesting, during a meal, before a long trip, and the like. The performance of *ku pahla* provides individuals and groups with a sense of security and stability. It is this permanent connection between the living and the dead that gives meaning to the existence of both the ancestral spirits and the living. Another way of establishing contact with the spirits is through possessed practitioners known in southern Mozambique as *tinyanga*. The *tinyanga* operate as intermediaries between the living world and that of the ancestral spirits, by acting as mediums.

In rural communities in Mozambique and Angola, people believe that mental illnesses are often related to the anger of the spirits of the dead. In southern Mozambique, these spirits are called *mipshukwa*—the spirits of the dead believed to have been killed unjustly and not properly buried. Burial rituals are essential to place the dead in their proper positions in the world of the ancestors. Thus, the souls of the unburied remain unsettled and become bitter spirits. It is believed that these spirits can afflict the living by causing mental illness or even death to those who killed or mistreated them in life. This revenge is also extended to the family of the killer, and they have to suffer the consequences of their relatives’ bad behavior. The *mipshukwa* spirits may also be nasty to passersby who cross their path.
Postwar Religious Practices

*Mipshukwa* spirits are particularly important after a war, when combatants and civilians are not appropriately buried. In fact, this phenomenon is often mentioned in connection with death in warfare. Some of the elder participants in the study recalled that after the *Nguni* wars in the nineteenth century in southern Mozambique, the spirits of the *Nguni* and *Ndau* warriors killed in this region were not buried, and hence afflicted and killed many local families. The war between the Frelimo ruling party and RENAMO was also believed to have produced many spirits of bitterness, which could cause mental problems or death to the living if not properly appeased. Participants in the Mozambique and Angola studies were unanimous in stating that rituals for appeasing these spirits had to be performed in the places where battles occurred and many people died. These rituals were seen as vital to placing the spirits in their proper positions in the spiritual world. The rituals were generally performed by traditional practitioners (mediums and healers) who are seen as able to exorcise or appease such spirits.

In the Angolan provinces of Uige, Bie, Huambo, Moxico, and Malange, people mentioned that the spirits of the dead had to be appeased so that peace would ensue. Burial rituals for the dead were considered to be very important. Notwithstanding this importance, in circumstances of war it became extremely difficult or almost impossible to bury the dead properly. Thus, the number of dead without proper burials was enormous. Those who killed people, or witnessed killings, were particularly vulnerable to mental illness caused by the spirits of the dead they killed or saw being killed. An acknowledgement of the atrocities committed and subsequent break from that past was articulated through ritual performance. These would be burial rituals for the dead and also cleansing rituals for the living coming from the war. In other words, the transition from the space of war into the village (space of community and social norms) was mediated by these rituals.

After the war, when fighters and refugees returned home, they were believed to be potential contaminators of the social body. The spirits of the dead, which might haunt them, could disrupt life in their families and villages. Therefore, the cleansing process was seen as a fundamental condition for collective protection against social pollution caused during the war, and for the social reintegration of war-affected people into society.9

Postwar Rituals

In the postwar period, people performed various types of rituals. Apart from the burial rituals for the dead, there were rituals aimed at addressing the problems of war-affected people both individually or collectively.

Community Rituals

Community rituals were generally officiated by traditional leaders and practitioners who looked after the interests of the community as a whole. In the aftermath of war in Angola, people from the areas of Huambo and Bie performed a ritual called *okusiakala ondalao yokalye*, which could be translated as “let’s light a new fire.” This collective ritual is performed after crises such as natural disasters, war, and other misfortunes of great magnitude. The day of the ritual every household extinguishes their old fires. The traditional chief, helped by traditional practitioners, lights a new fire, sparked by the friction of two stones, in the center of the village. The people of the village are present to witness and participate in the ritual. A portion of this new fire is then distributed to every household so that all new fires have a common origin. The symbolism is simple but powerful: a burial of the past, a fresh beginning, and the rebirth of hope.

Cleansing Rituals

To address the problems of individual members, the communities performed cleansing rituals. Family members and the broader community attended these rituals. It was during these rituals that the individual was purged and purified of the contamination associated with war and death, as well as of sin and guilt, and protected against the retaliation of avenging bitter spirits.

When 17-year-old Paulo returned to his family after the war, he was taken to the *ndumba* (the house of the spirits) to be presented to the ancestral spirits. A few days later, a female healer came to perform the cleansing ritual for
him. Followed by family and friends, Paulo was taken to the bush and into a small hut. Dressed with the dirty clothes he brought from the war, he entered the hut and took off his war uniform. Then, fire was set to the hut, and an adult relative helped him out. The hut and the clothes were burned to ashes. After that Paulo and all his relatives had to leave the ritual place without looking back. At the family home, Paulo’s body was cleansed by the healer—he inhaled the smoke of herbal remedies, he drank a solution made with local herbal medicines, and washed his entire body with water also treated with local herbal remedies. The ritual ended with the sacrifice of chicken to make the ritual meal, which was shared by those present with the ancestral spirits.

These rituals were replete with symbolism whose details were distinctive to the particular ethnolinguistic groups, but whose general themes would be common to all groups.

These healing rituals brought together a series of symbolic meanings aimed at cutting the community and the individual’s link with the past (the war). While modern psychotherapeutic practices emphasize verbal exteriorization of afflictions, in this context the past was locked away through symbolic meanings. For example, to talk and recall the past was not necessarily seen as a prelude to healing or diminishing pain. On the contrary, it was often believed to open the space for the malevolent forces (the spirits of bitterness) to intervene. Although children and adults could share their war experiences with close relatives and friends, this was not seen as a fundamental condition for healing. The rituals were aimed at symbolically cleansing the polluted community and individuals from the bloodshed of the war and helping put the war experience behind them.

The cleansing rituals did not involve verbal exteriorization of the experience as an important condition for the cure. Healing was achieved through nonverbal symbolic procedures, which were understood by those participating in them. Clothes and other objects symbolizing the past had to be burned or washed away to impress on the individual and the group a complete rupture with that experience and the beginning of a new life. Recounting and remembering the traumatic experience would have been like opening a door for the harmful spirits to penetrate the community. Viewed from this perspective, the well-meaning attempts of modern psychotherapists to help local people deal with war trauma could have caused more harm than help.

The performance of these rituals and the politics that precede them transcended the particular individuals concerned and involved the collective body. The community comes together to light a new fire and establish a new and fresh beginning; family and friends participate in the cleansing ritual, which also involves the ancestral spirits who are implicated in mediating for a positive outcome. The rituals are aimed at asking for forgiveness, appeasing the souls of the dead, and preventing any future afflictions (retaliation) from the spirits of the dead, closing in this way the links with that “bad” past.
Conclusion

According to local beliefs, polluted individuals could contaminate society if, on their return, they were not properly cleansed. Therefore, cleansing rituals were vital for society’s protection against the evils of war and for freeing the individual from spiritual retaliation, which could lead to mental illness or death. Considering that the majority of the Mozambicans and Angolans affected by the war came from rural settings, and that ways of thinking about healing and reconciliation in many African communities remain distinct from Western norms, attempts to help people deal with war traumas had to take into account their particular worldviews and systems of meaning. Local understandings of war trauma, of healing, and of community cohesion clearly need to be grasped when dealing with populations affected by conflict and political violence. At the local level, irrespective of other efforts to deal with the violent legacy, families, traditional chiefs, and healers created their own space to heal the social wounds of war. Instead of passively waiting for outsiders to bring in psychologists and other medical practitioners to help solve their problems, they used their own ways and means to restore peace and stability to their communities.

Three tentative conclusions could thus be drawn on the intricate dynamics of reconciliation. First, to take root, reconciliation processes need to be locally driven and owned. Second, reconciliation does not necessarily depend on talking about the past. On the contrary, talking about what happened can in some cases complicate and set back processes of dealing with trauma. Finally, the case study inspires a rethinking of the extent to which reconciliation can be achieved by words at all. Beyond the verbal sphere, an inclusive use of symbols and symbolic actions can be an equally important road to reconciliation.
**Key Events**


1975 Angola gains independence but power struggle ensues between MPLA, backed by Cuba, and the FNLA plus UNITA, backed by South Africa and the United States.

1975 Mozambique gains independence but a power struggle breaks out between FRELIMO and RENAMO.

1990 Members of the Mozambican Government (FRELIMO) hold first official talks with RENAMO in Rome.

1991 The MPLA’s José Eduardo dos Santos and UNITA’s Jonas Savimbi sign peace deal in Lisbon, which results in a new multiparty constitution in Angola.

1992 Angolan President dos Santo gains more votes in national elections than Savimbi, who rejects results and resumes guerrilla war.

1992 Mozambique’s Peace Accord is signed, ending civil war.


1998 Full-scale fighting resumes in Angola. Thousands killed in the next four years of fighting; Angola also becomes involved in neighboring Democratic Republic of the Congo’s civil war.

2002 Jonas Savimbi is killed in Angola; peace is established. National disarmament and demobilization begins. UNITA transitions to a political party.
Further Readings

This chapter is an abridged version from Alcinda Honwana, “Healing and Social Reintegration in Mozambique and Angola,” in Refugee Experience-Psychosocial Training, ed. M. Loughry and A. Ager Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre, 2001). Reprinted with permission from the Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford University. The Berkley Center gratefully thanks Dr. Honwana for use of the essay. Additional readings are provided below.


**Discussion Questions**

1. What were the causes of post-war trauma in Angola and Mozambique?

2. What religious and indigenous beliefs informed local views of health and healing?

3. What practices and religious rituals were used to overcome trauma?

4. What is the relationship between national level efforts at reconciliation and local efforts of reconciliation and healing?

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2. Vines, RENAMO; and Minter, *Apartheid’s Contras*.

3. Vines, RENAMO; and Minter, *Apartheid’s Contras*.


5. Minter, *Apartheid’s Contras*.


8. In the nineteenth century the *Ngunt* broke from the Zulu state of Shaka (in today’s South Africa) and migrated toward Mozambique, conquering and dominating the peoples they encountered on their way. During this process they subjugated the *Ndau* (a group from central Mozambique) and forced them down south as slaves in the *Ngunt* state of Gaza, which they established in the southern region after dominating the *Tsonga*. For more information see K. Rennie, “Christianity, Colonialism, and the Origins of Nationalism among the Ndau of Southern Rhodesia 1890-1935” (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Northwestern University, 1973); G. Liesegang, “Notes on the Internal Structure of the Gaza Kingdom of Southern Mozambique, 1840-1895” in *Before and After Shelka*, ed. J. B. Peires (Grahamstown: Institute of Social Economic Research, Rhodes University, 1981); and A. Rita-Ferreira, *Fixacao Portuguesa e Historia Pre-colonial de Mocambique* (Lisboa: Junta de Investigacoes Cientificas do Ultramar, 1982).
