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The vagaries of violence and power in post-colonial Mozambique

Gerhard Seibert

Renamo fought a bloody war from 1976 to 1992 against the socialist Frelimo government that devastated the country, but since Renamo had been created by Rhodesia and subsequently supported by South Africa, the internal dimensions of the conflict were played down. However, the resistance of large sections of Mozambican society against the authoritarian politics of the Frelimo regime explains why Renamo did not remain a small guerrilla force but finally controlled entire regions of the country. The excessive violence against civilians by Renamo obscured the fact that in certain regions the movement enjoyed popular support. The conflict in Mozambique was both a modern war with sophisticated weapons and an armed conflict where ritual powers played a role. After the war, collective and individual rituals contributed to the reconciliation of the warring parties and the reintegration of individuals into their local communities.

Introduction

Just one year after independence and the end of the struggle by the Liberation Front of Mozambique (Frelimo) against the Portuguese colonial army, Mozambique once again became a theatre of war when the Mozambican National Resistance (Renamo) began its campaign against the socialist Frelimo government. The war lasted twelve years and was one of the most violent and destructive periods in post-colonial African history. The conflict was not only a

modern war with sophisticated weapons and the interference of foreign powers but was also an armed conflict in which traditional methods of warfare and ritual powers were influential. Renamo used terror and excessive violence often of a ritualized form in areas controlled by the government and in zones where initial popular support for Renamo had vanished due to the forced recruitment of youngsters and the coercive methods the rebels employed to compel people to hand over food. This chapter considers the violence not as the individual acts of sadistic commanders or the consequence of poor military discipline but as Renamo's way of deliberately terrorizing the local population. However violence and terror tactics were not the prerogative of the Renamo forces and were employed equally by government forces.

About one million people lost their lives during the conflict, an estimated 200,000 children were orphaned and another 250,000 separated from their families.¹ Some 1.7 million people, more than 10 per cent of the total population, fled to neighbouring countries and another 4.3 million people became so-called *deslocados* (displaced persons) and sought refuge in the cities and other government-controlled areas² while the rebels systematically destroyed their schools, hospitals and government buildings. The excessive violence against civilians frequently tended to obscure the fact that there were considerable regional differences on both sides as far as the relationship between soldiers and the local population was concerned.

Popular resistance by large sectors of Mozambican society to the modernization projects of the socialist Frelimo regime, as well as the regional contradictions stemming from the (pre-)colonial era and the widespread use of violence can all help to explain how Renamo was able develop from a small, externally created rebel group into a large guerrilla army that finally controlled entire regions of the country.

The origins of Renamo

Renamo was set up in 1976 by the Rhodesian secret service, the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO), to attack Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) bases across the border in Mozambique and destabilize the Frelimo regime because of the support it offered the

¹ A.A. de Abreu, 'Mozambican Women Experiencing Violence', in M. Turshen & C. Taagiramariya (eds), *What Women Do in Wartime: Gender and Conflict in Africa* (London & New York, 1998), 74.

² S. Maslen, *ILO Action Programme on Skills and Entrepreneurship. Training for Countries Emerging from Armed Conflict. The Reintegration of War-Affected Youth: The Experience of Mozambique* (1997), 1.

Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU).³ However the Rhodesian army itself also attacked ZANLA bases, refugee camps and infrastructure in central Mozambique. For example, during a raid on a refugee camp in Nyazonia (Manica Province) in 1976 the Rhodesians killed some 600 people.⁴

The first members of Renamo recruited by the Rhodesians were demobilized Mozambican soldiers of the Portuguese colonial army and former Frelimo guerrillas who had fallen into disgrace at home. The rebel group was not given any political programme during its three-month military training in Odzi, Rhodesia but recruits were submitted to anti-communist and anti-Frelimo propaganda. The Rhodesians used to pay the rebels a regular monthly salary and an additional bonus for every successful operation they undertook,⁵ money that was an important motivational factor that encouraged young men, and their families in central Mozambique, to participate in the war.⁶

Violent recruitment methods

Many of the Renamo fighters were young men and children kidnapped during attacks on their villages.⁷ In many cases Renamo forced children to kill one of their parents or a relative to break their links with the community and bind them to the movement through shame and guilt. Child soldiers were reportedly forced to smoke a mixture of *soruma* (marijuana) and gunpowder to increase their courage and physical strength.⁸ Child units were primarily employed in attacks on civilians and in looting raids on local communities to provide bases with supplies. They were rarely involved in direct confrontations with government troops.⁹ Most children were abducted in the south where Renamo was less well-established among the local population. Escape was risky since Renamo would retaliate with immediate execution and abducted men and children were usually taken to distant training camps to prevent escape. In addition, the threat of being

³ At the time the official designation was Mozambican National Resistance (MNR).

⁴ W. Finnegan, *A Complicated War: The Harrowing of Mozambique* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 1992), 31.

⁵ G. Tajú, 'Renamo: Os factos que conhecemos', *Cadernos de História. Boletim do Departamento de História da Universidade Eduardo Mondlane*, 7 (1988), 16.

⁶ J. Schafer, 'Guerrillas and Violence in the War in Mozambique: De-socialization or Re-socialization?', *African Affairs*, 100 (2001), 224.

⁷ Female soldiers fought on both sides during the conflict but their numbers were insignificant. Only 1,380 women were demobilized (about 1.5 per cent of the total of 92,881). J. Schafer, 'A Baby Who Does Not Cry Will Not Be Suckled. AMODEG and the Reintegration of Demobilized Soldiers', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 1 (1998), 16.

⁸ *Ibid.* 16 & 21.

⁹ O. Roesch, 'Renamo and the Peasantry in Southern Mozambique: A View from Gaza Province', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 26 (3), 472.

punished by the government after their return discouraged the captives from abandoning Renamo. Anyone who escaped the clutches of Renamo was likely to find himself in a no-win situation as government forces frequently accused escaped captives of having failed to fight Renamo forces or of being Renamo collaborators, in which case they were severely punished.

Promotion within Renamo military ranks was not dependent on how a person had been recruited and some of those abducted during Renamo raids even made it to the rank of general. One, for example, had been travelling in a bus full of young men who had been forcefully recruited by the government when Renamo attacked the vehicle and took all the men to their own training camp.

Frelimo used to act similarly and did not only regularly organize raids to kidnap young men for military service, but also recruited children by force, albeit to a lesser extent than Renamo. At the time of their recruitment, 16,553 government soldiers (23.3 per cent of the total Frelimo soldiers later demobilized) and 8,945 Renamo guerrillas (40.7 per cent) had been under 18 years of age. Another 4,334 Renamo soldiers (19.7 per cent of total ex-Renamo fighters) and 3,073 government soldiers were aged between 10 and 14 at the time of their abduction and can be considered child soldiers.¹⁰ According to a survey conducted during the demobilization process, 82 per cent of Frelimo soldiers and 87 per cent of Renamo guerrillas were recruited by force.¹¹

To increase the educational level of its cadres, Renamo lured some 200 secondary school students into its ranks by promising scholarships to study abroad. However, the opportunities never materialized and many of the students died in the rebel camps of disease and hardship.¹² While coercion was dominant in recruitment, voluntary participation in the war was due to a lack of alternative opportunities. Basic survival and the chance of gaining access to goods and food, and sometimes a vague notion of political conviction against Frelimo's socialist projects played a role in the recruitment process.¹³ Even in the south of the country where Renamo did not enjoy much popular support and despite the dangers of war and the Renamo's notoriously strict discipline, young men were attracted by the excitement of guerrilla life, adventure, the availability

¹⁰ S. Barnes, *The Socio-Economic Reintegration of Demobilised Soldiers in Mozambique. The Soldiers' View* (Maputo, 1997), 17. Children under 15 years of age at the end of the war were excluded from the official demobilization process.

¹¹ Schafer, 'A Baby', 217.

¹² J.C.G. Pereira, 'The Politics of Survival: Peasants, Chiefs and Renamo in Meringue District, Mozambique, 1982-1992', Unpublished MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, 1999), 43.

¹³ Schafer, 'Guerrillas', 236.

of women, and easy access to looted goods.¹⁴ Occasionally during Renamo attacks on local communities, young boys even joined the rebels in looting their neighbours' houses and then left with the attackers. Everywhere in the impoverished country large sectors of the population found themselves without schooling, skills or employment. The rampant economic crisis and the devastating war had increased the numbers of those marginalized, creating a fertile ground for further Renamo recruitment. Derluguian suggests that people who find themselves constantly in a situation of disintegrating social relations and generalized instability caused by crisis and war lose any immunity to violence and easily become both its object and subject.¹⁵

Renamo's military organization

Renamo was never composed of loosely operating small units but was a centrally organized and hierarchical military organization. Under the supervision of Afonso Dhlakama who became Renamo's president and commander-in-chief in 1980, there was a 15-member military council composed of the three principal commanders of the north, centre and south zones and ten provincial commanders. The basic operational unit was a company of some 100 to 150 men, generally stationed at a central main base with smaller attached bases responsible for special tasks such as security and patrols. A company was divided into platoons, while two or three companies formed a battalion. Usually two or more battalions were based near the provincial headquarters but spread over several bases. Each company had modern radio transmission facilities operated by a communications officer who was in regular contact with the provincial base and indirectly with the headquarters in Gorongosa. The general staff was equipped with a system capable of frequency hopping that impeded detection by government forces.

While the middle and lower-level cadres were multi-ethnic,¹⁶ the military leadership was dominated by Ndau speakers from central Mozambique, a subgroup of the Shona to which Dhlakama also belongs. They were the first to have been recruited by the Rhodesians and over time had assumed senior

¹⁴ A. Harneit-Sievers, 'Sozialgeschichte des Bürgerkrieges in Mosambik. Ein Workshop in Maputo', *Afrika Spectrum* 30, 1 (1995), 88; Roesch, 'Renamo and the Peasantry', 476.

¹⁵ G. Derluguian, 'Social Decomposition and Armed Violence in Postcolonial Mozambique', *Review* XIII, 4 (1990), 439-62.

¹⁶ M. Cahen, 'Nationalism and Ethnicities: Lessons from Mozambique', in E. Braathen, M. Bøås & G. Sæther, *Ethnicity Kills? The Politics of War, Peace and Ethnicity in SubSaharan Africa* (New York & Houndmills, 2000), 172.

positions within Renamo's military hierarchy. Consequently, Ndaue was the official language in Gorongosa and at many bases, but the *lingua franca* used in a particular unit depended on the ratio of different ethnic groups represented in its ranks.¹⁷ When Renamo arrived in a new area the majority of the rebels were Ndaue speakers. However, over time they became the commanders, while the majority of the ordinary guerrillas were local people. Also the *madjuba* (sing. *ndjuba*),¹⁸ the local Renamo representatives and spies, used to come from the native population. Many had been colonial tax collectors or junior officials dismissed by Frelimo after independence. The *madjuba* maintained links between the Renamo base and the local population and were in charge of the labour recruitment of carriers and others. They did not usually live on the base, but nearby. They were not issued with firearms but used knives, machetes or other similar weapons. It was the *madjuba* who were said to have committed many of the worst atrocities during the war and regularly mutilated their victims by cutting off their ears, noses, and hands.

Renamo bases

The principal bases were established in sparsely populated regions but at a distance of less than about 50 km from more densely populated areas and main roads since the rebels needed access to these areas for supplies.¹⁹ The excellent radio communication of Renamo troops enabled dispersed units to assemble quickly to mount large-scale attacks and then disperse again.

Although Renamo's communication system was superior to the Frelimo's, the rebels had almost no heavy artillery or mechanized transport²⁰ so its troops had to cover large distances on foot, sometimes walking more than 500 km. They relied on the plundering of local food stocks and the abduction of local people to supply their labour requirements. During looting and pillaging raids, everything that could be transported was taken away: cattle, pigs, poultry, foodstuffs, clothes, radios, china and household items. To supply the food needs of the base, Renamo soldiers exchanged looted goods with the local population for foodstuffs and some of the captured goods were even sold in neighbouring countries. During their attacks, Renamo forced local inhabitants to carry the booty back to the military base and as they were often taken by surprise during night-time raids they had to walk barefoot and in their underwear. In a few cases the captives even had to walk distances of more than 250 km to the

¹⁷ M. Hall, 'The Mozambican National Resistance Movement (Renamo): A Study in the Destruction of an African Country', *Africa*, 60, 1 (1990), 46.

¹⁸ ZANU used the same designation for supporters within the local population.

¹⁹ G. Liesegang, 'Der Bürgerkrieg in Mosambik ca. 1980-1992. Abläufe und struktureller Wandel des Landes', Unpublished manuscript (Maputo, 1995), 14.

²⁰ Finnegan, *A Complicated War*, 58.

bases.²¹ Usually the whole group walked in Indian file, with the rebels at either end and in the middle to prevent the abducted inhabitants escaping. During the march to the base only the guerrillas were allowed to eat. Exhausted load carriers who were unable to walk further would be killed in front of the others and babies were murdered immediately as the rebels feared that their crying would alert government forces to their presence. Renamo soldiers frequently raped the mainly female carriers during the retreat in front of the other captives.

Most men and some of the women were released after the guerrillas reached their bases. Civilians who were forced to stay with the rebels on the base found themselves in what was cynically called *liberdade* (freedom).²² If a Renamo spy at the base was recognized by one of the newly arrived captives, he usually ordered the immediate execution of the kidnapped, since he feared being denounced if the person managed to escape.²³ The abducted women and girls were forced to join the officers' and soldiers' households, either as wives or in the case of young girls as servants. Some commanders reportedly had more than five women.²⁴ In the early 1980s when the main base was in Garágua (Manica), Dhlakama himself was said to have eight wives, who were officially his bodyguards.²⁵ As the wife of a military man, a captive woman enjoyed some protection and was not expected to render sexual services to other men. However, the women of soldiers whose units were transferred remained at the base and received new partners.²⁶ Young women in the camps who did not become pregnant risked being killed by their partners.²⁷ Newly arrived women frequently became the source of disputes between the guerrillas so to avoid conflict, the problem was solved by killing the woman.²⁸ The rebels considered rape and the use of slave wives as their right of access to women and important war booty.²⁹

²¹ Liesegang, 'Der Bürgerkrieg', 9.

²² F. Pequenino, 'Estudo de Caso: Localidade Administrativa de Mugeba (Zambezia), 1982 a 1992', Unpublished paper, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (Maputo, 1994), 21.

²³ P. de Jesus, 'Alguns Aspectos do Impacto da Guerra em Certas Zonas de Inharrime e Zavala', Unpublished paper, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (Maputo, 1994), 17.

²⁴ N. Castanheira, *Ex-criança Soldado: 'Não Queremos Voltar para o Inferno'* (Maputo, 1999), 11.

²⁵ Tajú, 'Os factos', 21.

²⁶ Liesegang, 'Der Bürgerkrieg', 32.

²⁷ Ibid. 24.

²⁸ H.C. Mucusetse, 'Um Estudo de Caso: O Distrito de Angoche', Unpublished paper. Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (Maputo, 1994), 39.

²⁹ K.B. Wilson, 'Cults of Violence and Counter Violence in Mozambique', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 3 (1992), 536.

The women living on the bases carried goods between bases, looted villages and in the case of permanent bases cultivated plots to produce food. Despite the threat of immediate execution, married women in particular often tried to escape as soon as they had more freedom of movement, while younger single women tended to make the best of their situation and only returned home after the war, often with children. Some continued their relationships with the fighters but most women returned home and were accepted back by their former husbands. Families submitted these women and returning child soldiers to purification rituals performed by traditional healers or pastors of Zionist churches.³⁰ Schafer maintains that during the war both government soldiers and Renamo guerrillas considered women in enemy-controlled areas as fair prey for capture and sexual abuse, whereas women in their own areas were generally treated according to local social norms.³¹

A base such as that in Chigowa, Tete Province, was representative of other permanent Renamo bases located in the centre and north of the country.³² The military command was situated at the centre of the base, surrounded by the compounds of guerrillas with more than two or three wives, depending on the number of women taken captive. Further out beyond these residences were the huts of the single women who had to render sexual services to off-duty soldiers. Then came the old people and the children's houses and the corrals where the commanders' stolen cattle were kept. The base was surrounded by three circular protection rings. The *machambas*, the fields for cultivation, were located between the first and second rings. Renamo bases in the south were by contrast only small, often mobile, bases that did not usually have fields or permanent huts but only provisional tents made of plastic sheets or cotton. In the case of a government attack they could easily be moved. The bases relied entirely on plunder and looting for their everyday supplies.

Both soldiers and captives were severely punished for disobedience and the bases often had prisons. Child soldiers were not excluded from punishments that ranged from corporal punishment, the withholding of food, the amputation of fingers, noses and ears, and executions carried out by one or more of the other children.³³ Captives who could not endure the military training were also killed.³⁴ The people on the Renamo bases were also affected by disease and periods of famine when attacks and plundering failed to provide sufficient food.

³⁰ E. Muianga, 'Mulher e a Guerra', Unpublished paper, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (Maputo, 1994); Castanheira, *Ex-criança Soldado*, 12.

³¹ Schafer, 'Guerrillas', 233.

³² R.M. Kuyeri, 'História Social da Guerra em Tete', Unpublished paper, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (Maputo, 1994).

³³ Maslen, *ILO Action Programme*, 15.

³⁴ Castanheira, *Ex-criança Soldado*, 26.

If food supplies were limited, the guerrillas received what was available and the civilians were simply left to their own devices.³⁵ Some of the permanent bases had a military hospital and occasionally Renamo kidnapped *curandeiros* (healers) and pastors of Zionist churches and took them to the bases where they were obliged to tend the sick and wounded.³⁶

The unfolding of the conflict and external support

The first Renamo attack occurred on 3 February 1977, on the anniversary of the death of Frelimo's first president, Eduardo Mondlane.³⁷ On that day two men attacked a school bus on the road between Chimoio and Manica town, just across the border, to kidnap students for military training in Rhodesia.³⁸ One of the two attackers was the legendary André Matsangaissa, a Manyika shoemaker and former Frelimo guerrilla who had fled to Rhodesia from the re-education camp in Sacuza (Gorongoso District, Sofala Province), where he had been imprisoned for embezzling funds after independence. Later in 1977, Matsangaissa, who in the meantime had become Renamo's leader, commanded a group that attacked the prison camp in Sacuza and succeeded in freeing 75 detainees who were all taken to Rhodesia and incorporated into the emerging Renamo.³⁹ As a result of Matsangaissa's fame Renamo guerrillas became popularly known as *matsangas*, whereas the official propaganda labelled them as *bandidos armados* (armed bandits). Matsangaissa was killed during a battle with Frelimo in Gorongosa on 17 October 1979 and his succession was fiercely disputed. Finally Afonso Dhlakama, the son of a local chief in Sofala Province, got his way and became the new Renamo leader. He had reportedly given orders to execute his rival Lucas Muchanga, Renamo's second-in-command at the time.⁴⁰

During the years of Rhodesian patronage Renamo's operations were largely restricted to the central provinces of Manica and Sofala. Projects associated with Frelimo such as so-called *lojas do povo* (people's shops), *aldeias comunais*

³⁵ Pereira, 'The Politics of Survival', 48.

³⁶ Castanheira, *Ex-criança soldado*, 25.

³⁷ He was killed by a parcel bomb in Dar es Salaam in 1969.

³⁸ Personal account of Sebastião Chapepa alias Janota Luís, one of the participants, Chimoio, December 1999.

³⁹ *Tempo*, 26 January 1997.

⁴⁰ In 1983 and 1988 respectively, other internal conflicts resulted in the murders of Renamo's two first secretary-generals: Orlando Christina, a white Portuguese, in South Africa, and Evo Fernandes, a Mozambican of Goan descent, near Lisbon, Portugal.



Map 10.1 Mozambique

(communal villages) and agricultural cooperatives, as well as lorries, buses and trains were the principal targets for attack. At that time, Africa Livre, another small rebel movement based in Malawi, frequently infiltrated and attacked border areas in Zambezia and southern Niassa.

Following Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, Renamo was taken over by South Africa that was keen to support and equip the movement in an attempt to destabilize the Frelimo government. The South Africans were easily able to supply Renamo by air or by sea, since Mozambican government forces were unable to defend the country's large air space and its 2,000 km long coastline. Pretoria's political objective was to force Frelimo to abandon its socialist policy, pursue a more friendly attitude towards South Africa and deny the ANC a safe haven. South Africa was not, however, motivated by a desire to see a Renamo government in power in Mozambique.

Encouraged by its new patrons to promote its international credibility, Renamo for the first time opened representations abroad and in 1981 approved a political programme calling for a government of national unity, democratic elections and a mixed economy. The following year, the movement published a list of members of the National Council. However, the political structures remained minimal and Renamo was always predominantly a military organization.

With South Africa's support, the movement began a successful military expansion into the country's remaining provinces. Within two years its strength had increased from 500 to 8,000 guerrillas⁴¹ and following the opening of a northern front with Malawi as a staging ground in 1981, the splinter group Africa Livre merged with Renamo. In late 1983 Renamo transferred its headquarters from Phalaborwa (Northern Transvaal) to Gorongosa in Mozambique. The 35,000 government troops were unable to stop Renamo since they were not prepared for anti-guerrilla warfare. Instead, Frelimo forces had been trained in conventional army operations, fearing a possible invasion by the white Rhodesian and South African minority regimes after independence. Government forces were additionally constrained by a lack of education and low morale.⁴²

Faced with the advancing rebels, a non-existent infrastructure and a collapsing economy, the Mozambican government sought a peace settlement with South Africa and in March 1984 the Nkomati Accord was signed by the

⁴¹ C. Alden, 'Political Violence in Mozambique: Past, Present and Future', in W. Gutteridge & J.E. Spence (eds), *Violence in Southern Africa* (London & Portland, Or, 1997), 43.

⁴² S.L. Weigert, *Traditional Religion and Guerrilla Warfare in Modern Africa* (New York & Houndmills, 1995), 83.

two countries. According to this agreement South Africa would end its support of Renamo, while Mozambique would expel the ANC. In September 1985 Mozambican government troops overran the Gorongosa headquarters, but Renamo soon recaptured it. Documents found in Gorongosa proved that, despite the non-aggression pact, some sectors of the South African regime still continued to support Renamo. Military support for Frelimo, provided by Tanzanian troops in Quelimane in 1987 and Zimbabwean forces in central Mozambique from 1982 onwards, could only temporarily help the government troops to recapture some of the lost ground, but was not able to halt the rebels' expansion. Besides, the Zimbabwean contingent's mission was primarily restricted to protecting the Beira-Mutare corridor that provided trade access for most of Zimbabwe's imports. When Renamo had to leave its bases in Malawi in late 1986 several thousand expelled fighters invaded Zambezia Province in a wave of violence. Subsequently the fighting intensified in the northern provinces of Niassa, Nampula and Cabo Delgado.

While Renamo controlled large parts of the rural areas, the government always maintained control of the cities and most district capitals. Consequently, and contrary to what happened in Angola, Mozambique's larger cities were not affected by fighting and shelling at all. The areas permanently defended and protected by the government covered little more than 10 per cent of the country.⁴³ In areas in central and northern Mozambique that remained permanently under its control for many years, Renamo ran schools and a health service and reinstalled deposed local chiefs who assumed some juridical and administrative functions. The origin of the soldiers reflected the government's control of the urban centres: Frelimo recruited most of its soldiers in the cities, while the majority of Renamo troops came from the countryside.

Peace

As at the beginning of the conflict, the international and regional political constellations were instrumental in the cessation of the bloody war in Mozambique. Government troops received weapons, transport, fuel and the bulk of its food supplies from abroad⁴⁴ and Renamo relied on external sources

⁴³ G. Liesegang, 'Der Bürgerkrieg in Mosambik ca. 1980-1992. Abläufe und struktureller Wandel des Landes', unpublished manuscript (Maputo, 1995), 28.

⁴⁴ Liesegang, 'Der Bürgerkrieg', 41.



A Renamo unit equipped with SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles
Source: *A luta continua!*, 3, 1 February 1982, 5

for its supply of arms, sea and air transport, and modern communications equipment. With the end of apartheid and the Cold War, the warring parties in Mozambique lost this necessary external support and were ready to negotiate a peace settlement.

The success of the amnesty offered from early 1988 to Renamo fighters who turned themselves over to the authorities was limited. During the two years of this programme, Renamo recruited more men than the approximately 4,000 who officially surrendered to the government.⁴⁵ Despite offers of clemency, more Frelimo soldiers deserted than did Renamo rebels.⁴⁶ At the end of the 1980s the failure of the socialist development project had forced Frelimo to introduce political and economic reforms that largely met both the demands of Renamo and the interests of its foreign sponsors. At its 5th party congress, held in mid-1989, Frelimo dropped all Marxist-Leninist dogma from its programme and a new democratic constitution was approved in November the following year.

Negotiations in the late 1980s brought Renamo the political recognition it demanded from Frelimo. After several rounds of negotiations in Rome, with the Santo Egídio community serving as mediators, a general peace accord was signed in October 1992. Following the end of hostilities 64,130 government troops and 22,637 Renamo guerrillas were demobilized under the supervision of a special UN mission (UNUMOZ). The number of Renamo soldiers considerably surpassed that of the 8,000 Frelimo guerrillas who had fought against the Portuguese colonial army during the 1964-1974 liberation struggle that had only affected five provinces.⁴⁷ In the course of this conflict the strength of the Portuguese colonial army had increased from 30,000 men to 75,000.⁴⁸ By the end of the colonial war about 60 per cent of the Portuguese army in Mozambique were local African troops.⁴⁹

Internal dimensions

As Renamo had been created and supported by the white minority regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa, for many years the internal dimensions of the conflict were largely played down or completely denied.⁵⁰ Initially external factors dominated the scholarly debate on the war in Mozambique and it was preliminarily understood to have taken place as a result of Rhodesian and

⁴⁵ Ibid. 21.

⁴⁶ Weigert, *Traditional Religion*, 85.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 23.

⁴⁸ Finnegan, *A Complicated War*, 111.

⁴⁹ Weigert, *Traditional Religion*, 127.

⁵⁰ See Cahen, 'Nationalism', 164.

subsequently South African destabilization that was supported by neo-colonial and reactionary groups in Portugal and the United States. This view was largely in accordance with that of the Frelimo government that insisted that the conflict was a case of external aggression, with Renamo being used as a proxy force.

Only in the late 1980s following the publication of the pioneering work of the late French anthropologist Christian Geffray, who had done research on the causes of the conflict in the northern province of Nampula, did the local dynamics of the conflict receive more attention and the discussion become more open. Geffray demonstrated that conflicts and social changes within the peasantry that emerged due to the government's forced resettlement of many people as part of the communal village programme had created a favourable environment for Renamo.⁵¹ Meanwhile it has become almost uncontested that it was popular resistance against Frelimo policies that formed fertile ground for the emergence of Renamo. Large sectors of the population resisted government policies because they felt marginalized, discriminated against and oppressed.

Resentment of villagization

Prominent among the groups that resented Frelimo's policies were the peasants and former local chiefs who provided most of Renamo's support since they were most directly affected by the regime's socialist modernization project.⁵² The central government's ambitious programme of compulsory villagization of the countryside, the establishment of the *aldeias comunais* that forced thousands of peasant families to leave their ancestral rural homesteads and move to other areas provoked anger and bitterness directed towards Frelimo, particularly when the people began to realize that the promised improvements in their living and working conditions were not materializing.⁵³ Renamo's military expansion increased the speed of villagization efforts, since Frelimo tried to keep the

⁵¹ C. Geffray & M. Pederson, 'Sobre a guerra na província de Nampula. Elementos de análise e hipóteses sobre as determinações e consequências sócio-económicas locais', *Revista Internacional de Estudos Africanos*, 4-5 (1986), 303-18 and C. Geffray, *La Cause des Armes au Mozambique. Anthropologie d'une Guerre Civile* (Paris, 1990), published in Portuguese as *A Causa das Armas. Antropologia da Guerra Contemporânea em Moçambique* (Porto, 1991).

⁵² Ibid. 5.

⁵³ The villagization programme, a cornerstone of the rural collectivization policy, had been approved at Frelimo's third party congress in 1977. By the early 1980s, 1,350 communal villages had been established, accommodating 18 per cent of the rural population, more than 1.8 million people. A. Dinerman, 'In Search of Mozambique: The Imaginings of Christian Geffray in *La Cause des Armes au Mozambique*. Anthropologie d'une Guerre Civile', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20, 4 (1994), 571.

peasants away from the rebels. Pereira suggests that the regime's major concern with regard to villagization was the concentration of the rural people to exert political control, rather than to improve agricultural output by collective production.⁵⁴ Increasingly peasants perceived villagization as a government attempt to facilitate tax collection, apply public corporal punishment and oblige people to participate in so-called voluntary labour. Frequently, discontented residents of communal villages who wanted to return to their former homesteads helped Renamo to destroy the newly formed settlements.

The central government had substituted the local chiefs with administrators and party secretaries who often came from other regions, did not speak the local language and were not familiar with the local culture. The substitution with outside administrators of the *régulos* who derived their legitimacy and authority through the political and religious functions they exercised in their communities created considerable discontent in many rural areas. This dissatisfaction increased when the regime's promises of an improved standard of living did not come about and the people were confronted with the hardships of the economic crisis and the regime's coercive measures. In general, the new people in charge within the public administration and the economy throughout the country were southerners. This southern dominance, which was veiled by Frelimo's anti-tribal discourse of national unity, nurtured existing regional tensions that stemmed from the colonial period.⁵⁵

The disproportionately high number of senior positions occupied by people from the south has frequently been denounced by non-southerners as domination by a second Gaza Empire, a reference to the Gaza kingdom of the Nguni in the nineteenth century that controlled large parts of central Mozambique. The *régulos*, the former chiefs, were prohibited from exercising their political functions as early as 26 June 1975 since, according to the Frelimo, they had been part of the colonial system. Therefore many *régulos* were willing to support Renamo when the rebels appeared. In turn, Renamo accepted local traditions and religion, reinstated the former *régulos* and entrusted them with the public administration of the controlled area. Renamo restored customs such as polygamy and *lobolo* (bride price) that Frelimo had banned as feudal and reactionary practices.

As a result of southern dominance after independence, the local elites in the centre and the north felt marginalized by Frelimo. There were certain ethnic groups (Ndaus, Sena, Macua) who were represented neither in the party nor in the state that also resented Frelimo. Not surprisingly, the interruption of traffic between Rhodesia and the seaport of Beira, as a consequence of the sanctions

⁵⁴ Pereira, 'The Politics of Survival', 30.

⁵⁵ Cahen, 'Nationalism', 169-71.

introduced in 1976 against the Smith regime and the resulting economic decline of this city, were perceived by many local inhabitants as a deliberate measure imposed by the central government in Maputo. The results of the elections in October 1994 and December 1999 when Renamo gained a majority of the votes in the central and northern provinces, while Frelimo completely dominated the southern provinces and the capital city, emphasized the crucial role played by regional factors in Mozambican politics.

In addition, Frelimo's Marxist-inspired revolutionary campaign against all religions including ancestor worship as obscurantism and the harassment of churches and traditional healers in the first years after independence alienated large sectors of the rural population. Other groups that were opposed to Frelimo were the former prisoners of the re-education camps established right after independence, including former colonial officials and Frelimo opponents, and some 50,000 urban migrants who were considered unproductive and arbitrarily deported from the cities in the south to the rural areas in the north, particularly to Nampula and Niassa, as part of the *Operação Produção* (Operation Production) in 1983. Many of these men voluntarily joined Renamo since they were eager to take revenge on the government. For many who had initially been in favour of Frelimo, the rapid economic decline after independence, the resulting scarcity of consumer goods, poor marketing of agricultural products, and queues in the shops discredited the government's programme of national reconstruction and constituted another factor in favour of Renamo.

Naturally there was not always a direct correlation between discontent with Frelimo and acceptance or support of Renamo. However, it is unlikely that without the cooperation of the local population Renamo would have been able to expand to such an extent that it was able to mobilize support throughout the whole country. Renamo was more successful in capitalizing on popular disenchantment with Frelimo in central and northern Mozambique where specific social and cultural conditions prevailed that were unfavourable for Frelimo.⁵⁶ The initial support for Renamo decreased over time due to the forced recruitment of youngsters and the permanent coercion of the rural population to supply food. Consequently many peasants fled from Renamo-controlled areas and those who remained tried to hide their possessions and produce in the bush. In response, Renamo increasingly resorted to terror and violence to force the local population's submission in occupied areas.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Roesch, 'Renamo and the Peasantry', 463.

⁵⁷ Pereira, 'The Politics of Survival', 49.

Violence and terror

Renamo rarely challenged government forces directly but preferred to attack civilians in rural areas. In war in non-industrialized societies, plundering and pillaging for food and other supplies and the abduction of women for sexual services have always instilled greater fear in the local population than the violence of a true battlefield.⁵⁸ Similar tactics were employed by Renamo in Mozambique where the preferred targets in the south and centre of the country included the *majonijoni* (the migrants who worked in the South African mines) whose houses were systematically looted due to their relative wealth.⁵⁹ Many migrant workers lost everything they had accumulated.

There appears to have been considerable regional variation in Renamo's military tactics and strategies, recruitment methods and violence against civilians. In his report on Mozambican refugees, Gersony identified three areas under Renamo's control according to the violence used against the population in each. The people living in tax areas that were located between the zones permanently controlled by Renamo and by the government were obliged to supply food to the guerrillas. The inhabitants of a control zone near a Renamo base had to provide forced labour including the transport of goods and booty to and between bases. They also had to provide food, and participate in patrolling and looting.⁶⁰ The population within a control zone was composed of local inhabitants, government dissidents and people abducted from other areas. The social relations between guerrillas and civilians were based on a system of organized violence where any disobedience or resistance was severely punished. However, there are also reports of cordial relations between peasants and Renamo soldiers, who, for example, asked the villagers for goats and chickens and promised to replace them as soon as they could loot zones beyond their permanent control.⁶¹ Destruction zones were areas where Renamo had not established a permanent presence and in these zones the rebels frequently attacked and looted rural settlements and communal villages.

Renamo violence against civilians

As long as it enjoyed the support of local communities, Renamo was less cruel and violent in the centre and the north of the country than in the south where Frelimo had a strong base and from where most of its leaders originated. Some people living in areas occupied by Renamo even claimed never to have

⁵⁸ Harneit-Sievers, 'Sozialgeschichte', 87.

⁵⁹ Liesegang, 'Der Bürgerkrieg', 15; Roesch, 'Renamo and the Peasantry', 478.

⁶⁰ Jesus, 'Alguns Aspectos', 14.

⁶¹ Ibid. 15.

witnessed any atrocities against civilians.⁶² However, the worst Renamo-organized violence and atrocities against civilians occurred in the south and in government-controlled regions elsewhere in the country. Renamo's violence against the rural population was instrumental in the sense that it undermined its legitimacy by demonstrating the inability of the Frelimo government to defend its population. Even spectacular mass killings like the July 1987 massacre of 424 civilians in Homoine (Inhambane) were apparently not spontaneous actions of local commanders but were deliberately committed with the agreement of the Renamo leadership to force the government to surrender. The major massacres occurred around 1987 in the south of Mozambique after the new government under Joaquim Chissano had rejected negotiations and tried to win the war.⁶³ Yet, the rebel movement has never assumed responsibility for the massacres, which were counterproductive regarding its international reputation and in the end prevented Renamo from receiving official American-government support.

During Renamo attacks, the principal targets were Frelimo party and state officials who were usually killed in front of the local population. Occasionally, local villagers had betrayed the officials to the arriving rebels⁶⁴ and exemplary violence including public mutilations and executions served to intimidate the general population, maintain control, and prevent escape from the occupied areas. Such atrocities aimed at spreading the news about Renamo violence far beyond the operational area to break any possible resistance in advance of the rebels' arrival. The rebels always allowed someone to escape to tell the terrifying story.⁶⁵ Frequently, the executioners used machetes and knives instead of firearms since they would not alert government forces, saved ammunition and created a maximum of fear.

Targets of systematic destruction were infrastructure such as local offices, schools and health posts because they symbolized the hated Frelimo state and represented a few of the regime's success stories. The local church or mosque was often the only building that was not destroyed during a Renamo attack, since Renamo sought religious legitimacy inside and outside the country.⁶⁶ The destruction of social infrastructure was part of a wider strategy based on the simple belief that whatever weakened Frelimo reinforced Renamo.⁶⁷ However, the rebels also engaged in inconceivable acts of brutality against defenceless

⁶² Finnegan, *A Complicated War*, 72.

⁶³ Liesegang, 'Der Bürgerkrieg', 21, 30.

⁶⁴ A. Cunhela, 'Uma análise sobre o impacto da Guerra nos aspectos sócio-económicos em Morrumbala, Zambesia, 1982-1992', Unpublished paper, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (Maputo, 1994), 4.

⁶⁵ K.B. Wilson, 'Cults of Violence', 527.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 540.

⁶⁷ Finnegan, *A Complicated War*, 77.

people that defy any concept of rationality. Some of the excessive violence was directed at sexual taboos. Rebels raped women in the presence of their husbands, relatives and neighbours and in other cases, fathers were forced to rape their daughters, and brothers were coerced into have sex with their sisters.⁶⁸ Obscure rites were also frequently practised by Renamo. For example, former captives reported that they had to drink water from the skulls of dead people.⁶⁹ Wilson stresses that ritualized violence often has to be incomprehensible in order to have the desired effect.⁷⁰

Government atrocities

The rural population also suffered from atrocities committed by government forces. People living in Renamo-controlled areas accused government soldiers of committing most of the violence directed at the local population.⁷¹ Occasionally, people living in areas visited by Renamo guerrillas were accused by the local authorities of having permitted Renamo forces to pass through their area, before being executed. Peasants living in areas in central Mozambique, which had been recaptured by Frelimo, fled into the bush or to Malawi since they feared that government troops would kill them in retaliation for their supposed support of Renamo.⁷² Government soldiers who accompanied convoys of citizens to protect them from Renamo assaults simulated ambushes to rob the people of their property. To avoid the loss of goods during such a journey and to ensure a safe arrival at their destination people went to the barracks prior to departure to bribe the commander of the convoy.⁷³

When government troops surprised Renamo guerrillas they often did not return stolen goods to their owners but took possession of them themselves. Mucusete reports from Angoche (Nampula) that when the local population tried to flee during a Renamo attack in the forest they found the paths blocked by police and government soldiers who beat them up and forced them to return to their homes saying 'Do you want to see us die alone?'.⁷⁴ While fleeing to their hiding-places during Renamo attacks, the military often took the goods that the peasants tried to rescue. Most of the government's popular militias were inferior to Renamo in terms of military training and equipment and were unable to

⁶⁸ In local culture these cases are reminiscent of ritual violations when a *curandeiro* asks his client to have sex with his mother or daughter to empower certain magic powers. Magic implying the use of human organs is also common in this context.

⁶⁹ Castanheira, *Ex-criança Soldado*, 29.

⁷⁰ Wilson, 'Cults of Violence', 533.

⁷¹ Schafer, 'Guerrillas', 219.

⁷² Pereira, 'The Politics of Survival', 28.

⁷³ Pequeno, 'Estudo de Caso', 16.

⁷⁴ Pequeno, 'Estudo de Caso', 39.

defend the people. Instead of defending the locals, many militia units abused their power by maltreating the population at control posts and during nightly patrols. Not receiving regular pay, the militias lived on what they confiscated from the locals or recaptured from Renamo forces.⁷⁵ The situation of the regular troops was not much better. Due to insufficient supplies caused by organizational shortcomings and disrupted military logistics, particularly in remote areas, government forces suffered from a lack of food and ammunition, and their wages were paid months in arrears. Morale deteriorated and soldiers coerced the local population into providing them with women and foodstuffs, attacked houses and plundered villages. In addition they diverted food aid from government institutions and international organizations. Frelimo soldiers in the cities were much less dependent on local resources since they had access to food supplies that could be used for barter.

The role of ritual power

In its propaganda, Renamo claimed that it was fighting in an alliance with the ancestral spirits to return the country to its ancestral traditions. It accused Frelimo of showing total disrespect for local religion and culture. On the battlefield Renamo commanders did not only place their trust in their modern weapons and sophisticated radio communication, but frequently resorted to local diviners and spirit mediums to protect them in combat or to guarantee the success of an attack. By reverting to magical military powers, Renamo continued the old traditions of war medicines used during anti-colonial rebellions and pre-colonial wars.⁷⁶ Matsangaíssa, who was surrounded by legends of magic powers and invulnerability, reportedly never waged an attack without first consulting his diviner. The same holds true for the majority of Renamo commanders.⁷⁷ Renamo's cult of violence terrified both the population and Frelimo soldiers, and its military successes were generally attributed to its superior magical powers.⁷⁸ People were convinced that the rebels, and particularly the Ndau speakers among them who are famous for their ritual powers throughout Mozambique, had powerful magic at their disposal.⁷⁹ The

⁷⁵ Liesegang, 'Der Bürgerkrieg', 37.

⁷⁶ Wilson, 'Cults of Violence', 546; D.A. do Rosário, *Makombe. Subsidios à Reconstituição da sua Personalidade* (Maputo, 1996); E. Rodrigues, 'A Africanização da Guerra nos Rios de Sena no Século XVIII', XXIV Congresso Internacional de História Militar. Lisbon, 24-29 August 1998.

⁷⁷ Weigert, *Traditional Religion and Guerrilla Warfare*, 81.

⁷⁸ Wilson, 'Cults of Violence', 547.

⁷⁹ Finnegan, *A Complicated War*, 228.

fame of a local *curandeiro* who possessed the ability to make men resistant to bullets, invisible to the enemy or transform government bullets into water served to attract new recruits.⁸⁰ The frequent consultation of their traditional healers gained Renamo the respect of the local people, who believe in the existence of powerful supernatural forces. On the other hand, spirit mediums working for Renamo forced peasants to cooperate with the rebels by praising their abilities, claiming that otherwise their ancestral spirits would become angry.⁸¹

Local beliefs in spirits and magical powers have always been widespread among the entire population, including Frelimo followers. Cuahela reported from Zambezia that people believed that government troops only succeeded in killing a feared Renamo guerrilla after they had managed to tie him up and remove his magical power from his pocket, a knot of hair in which a human nail and a glass-bead were tied together.⁸² In the same province the population attributed the recapture of a district capital by government forces in late 1987 to the intervention of a *curandeiro* whose magic resulted in a complete loss of vigilance within the Renamo ranks on that day. As it was felt that successful military leaders owed their abilities to supernatural powers, particular efforts were made to defeat and kill them. After the war, former guerrillas owed their survival to the protection of their ancestral spirits and many demobilized rebels spent part of their demobilization allowance on conducting rituals to thank the spirits for their safe return.⁸³

As a result of the inability of government forces to protect the population, an armed peasant movement known as Naparama (meaning 'irresistible force' in the Makua language) emerged in Nampula in 1988, where it successfully fought against Renamo and subsequently expanded to Zambezia. Naparamas, who were armed with traditional weapons such as *assegaïs* and machetes, were feared because of their supernatural powers that involved what Wilson calls a 'cult of counter-violence'.⁸⁴ Before they got their weapons, the peasant soldiers, who wore a red ribbon attached to their clothes, were initiated by being vaccinated with a medical plant that was rubbed into three cuts in their chests before they were plunged into water and had their bodies greased with oil. The commanders were initiated by the leader Manuel António, a Makua *curandeiro* who claimed to have died of measles only to be resurrected from the dead six days later and thought by Jesus Christ to make anti-bullet vaccines. The

⁸⁰ Ibid. 49.

⁸¹ Pereira, 'The Politics of Survival', 67.

⁸² A. Cuahela, 'História da Guerra na Zambézia. Um Estudo da Guerra em Namarrói, 1976-1996'. Unpublished paper, Universidade Eduardo Mondlane (Maputo, 1994), 12.

⁸³ Schafer, 'Guerrillas', 228.

⁸⁴ Wilson, 'Cults of Violence', 561.

syncretic Christian elements in António's religious discourse distinguishes it from Renamo's ritual powers that were derived from ancestral religious traditions. António's fighters were forbidden to rape, argue with or steal from the local population, shake hands with married men and women, or to have sex on the day prior to a battle. As in the case of other ritually empowered people in Southern Africa, it was believed that breaking these rules would result in death during combat, since the fighter had lost his supernatural powers and was no longer resistant to bullets.

The Naparamas also forced the local population to obey certain rules. People were not allowed to wash plates and pots in the river, shake off the water from washed clothes, beat clothes heavily during washing, spread out clothes on roofs, or pound grain at the end of the day. Disobedience required the summoning of the Renamo.⁸⁵ The peasant soldiers did not constitute a full-time standing army but usually stayed at home and tilled their *machambas*, only fighting Renamo when called upon to do so. They attacked in their hundreds, armed with spears and machetes, rattling tin cans and blowing cow horns to terrify the enemy. Thanks to the military successes of the Naparama, thousands of displaced people could return to their home areas. António claimed to have some 30,000 men at his disposal⁸⁶ and thanks to their magical protection, the Naparamas were believed to be able to fight the Renamo rebels without being hit by bullets themselves. Despite their superior arms, Renamo troops were so terrified by the appearance of Naparama fighters that the latter were able to withstand rebel attacks in large parts of northern Mozambique until António's death in Macuse near Quelimane in December 1991. The Naparama were militarily successful since they came from the same cultural background as the Renamo guerrillas, which allowed their magical forces to become an effective weapon. Accordingly, Renamo only succeeded in defeating the Naparama after having regained the superiority of magical powers.⁸⁷ In turn, Frelimo forces did not accuse Naparama of obscurantism but cooperated with them and supported them logistically. Frelimo soldiers are reported to have frequently asked them for their amulets to become resistant to bullets themselves.⁸⁸ However, while Frelimo soldiers resorted to magic predominantly on an individual base, for both Renamo and Naparama forces, the traditional religious and ritual discourse constituted an integral part of their struggle.

⁸⁵ Pequenino, 'Estudo de Caso', 11.

⁸⁶ Finnegan, *A Complicated War*, 255.

⁸⁷ Wilson, 'Cults of Violence', 575.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 29.

Conclusion

Renamo was set up by external forces hostile to the socialist Frelimo regime. However, the destabilization policy of the white minority regimes is insufficient explanation of the transformation of Renamo from a small rebel group into a powerful guerrilla army that controlled most of Mozambique by terrorizing the local populations. Large sections of the rural population facilitated the successful expansion of the rebel movement since they had been alienated from Frelimo by its forced collectivization of the countryside, the removal of traditional chiefs, and religious persecution. Entire regions and ethnic groups in northern and central Mozambique backed Renamo because they felt marginalized by the domination of southerners within the Frelimo regime. Regional divisions within Frelimo had emerged during the liberation struggle in the 1960s but historically their roots go back much further. Renamo's electoral successes in the 1994 and 1999 elections, when the opposition party gained a majority of votes in most central and northern provinces, have ultimately confirmed that the movement has always enjoyed considerable regional support.

Supernatural powers played an important role in this conflict. For Renamo, traditional religious discourse and resorting to magical rituals were integral parts of the war. Renamo committed the worst atrocities against civilians during the conflict in areas controlled by Frelimo and where the local population's initial support started to decrease as a result of the rebels' coercive measures. Renamo deliberately used excessive ritualized violence to instil a maximum of fear in the local population to maintain control and to guarantee supplies for their soldiers. According to this strategy, 'cult' violence had to be necessarily unpredictable, irrational and terrifying to achieve its intended goals. Renamo's lack of mechanized transport and of supplies led to the recurrence of traditional methods of transporting goods and persons. The acquisition of supplies by attack and coercion became a salient feature of the war. However, the terror and violence of Frelimo forces should not be ignored. Government troops did not accept any passive neutrality and frequently perceived the local population in areas controlled or visited by Renamo as collaborating with the rebels. Summary justice was meted out.

With both the government-controlled Frelimo forces and the Renamo rebels instilling fear in rural communities while expecting collaboration and cooperation in return, the result was a traumatized people who, regardless of which side they had initially supported, often became unsure of who was truly fighting on their behalf during this dark period in Mozambique's recent past.