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Continuity and Change of Community-Initiated Militias in Mozambique

Corinna Jentzsch

■ **ABSTRACT:** Community-initiated militias—self-defense forces for community protection—have played an important role in past and current armed conflicts in Mozambique. During the civil war between the Frelimo government and the armed group Renamo (1976–1992), the Naparama militia was established to protect communities from Renamo (and state) violence. In the current insurgency in Cabo Delgado province (since 2017), the Naparama has mobilized again to fight jihadist insurgents. This article makes use of long-term fieldwork in Mozambique, including original interviews, archival work, and newspaper analyses, to trace the conflict continuities in the case of the Naparama and analyze differences between their current and past manifestations. The discussion shows how the active remembrance and remobilization of prior conflict actors can partially legitimize new violence and contribute to the continuation of conflict.

■ **KEYWORDS:** civil war, civilian agency, civilian self-protection, insurgency, militias, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique

In November 2022, social media and newspaper reports spoke in admiring language of the re-emergence of a traditional militia, the Naparama, in northern Mozambique. The militia emerged to respond to a jihadist insurgency that had affected the northern-most province of Cabo Delgado since October 2017. The armed group was a community initiative to respond to insurgent incursions in two districts in southern Cabo Delgado, with the aim of protecting and defending the local population. Traditional healers treated recruits with a vaccine that supposedly made them immune to bullets and instructed them to follow specific rules of behavior to maintain the continued protection of the vaccine (TVM 2022).

I was surprised to hear about this sudden re-emergence of the Naparama, as I had been in Mozambique just a couple of months before, in September 2022, to study community responses to the ongoing armed conflict. During my visit, I had heard about activities of so-called local forces (*forças locais*), veterans of former armed conflicts who had regrouped in 2018, and by 2019 had requested and received support from the government (Cabo Ligado 2023a). I did not see, nor did I expect to see, any evidence of any local forces formed by traditional healers.

The reports hinting at a continuity of conflict actors in Mozambique also captured the attention of local media. A national television broadcaster sent a team of journalists to Cabo Delgado to interview Naparama combatants, who were showcased in their emblematic red ribbons around their heads and their weapons of “white steel,” decorated spears and knives (TVM 2022). The national newspaper *Notícias* ran a series of short articles on the history of the Naparama;



during the civil war, which the armed group Renamo fought against the Frelimo government from 1976 to 1992, the Naparama played an important role in pushing back Renamo. I understood this fascination to mean that the Naparama were considered a phenomenon of a heroic past, and their re-emergence was an unexpected but welcome development.

The Naparama was a familiar name to the people of central and northern Mozambique, as it reminded them of militia activity during the country's civil war from 1976–1992. In the late 1980s, communities in Zambézia and Nampula provinces formed militias to defend themselves against the atrocious violence of Renamo and to overcome the lack of protection from the state armed forces of the Frelimo government. The militia was formed by a traditional healer who treated youths with a vaccine that he believed would protect them from bullets (Jentzsch 2022; Nordstrom 1997). The group, called Naparama (those treated with the Parama vaccine), quickly spread from district to district in the central and northern provinces of Zambézia and Nampula. While the group initially succeeded in resisting Renamo, it lost significance when its main leader, Manuel António, died in a battle in 1990, two years before the end of the war. Although Naparama combatants demanded recognition as war veterans for demobilization efforts a few times after the end of the civil war in 1992 (Dinerman 2006; Jentzsch 2022), there was otherwise little national news and evidence on their continued existence and activity. This is why it was such a noticeable event that they re-emerged in November 2022.

As a long-term observer of Mozambican conflicts, I became curious about why the Naparama had re-emerged in Mozambique's current armed conflict, to what extent they had built on earlier manifestations, and to what extent they had changed over time. The main question I seek to answer in this article is, therefore: how have militias like the Naparama contributed to conflict continuities in Mozambique?

Conflict continuities, the theme of this special section, relates to how conflict is repeated, perpetuated, and reconfigured (see the Introduction to the special section). To conduct my analysis, I suggest that conflict continuities can be studied from three different perspectives: the *sites* (where does conflict continue: who are the actors, what do they do, and where are they active?), the *content* (what kind of conflict aspects persist: who is defined as a friend and who as a foe, and on what basis?) and *processes* (how does conflict continue: how are conflict narratives transmitted from one generation to the next?). This article uses this framework to analyze the actors and activities that build on and reconstruct earlier conflict actors and activities, developing two main arguments. First, the resurfacing of prior conflict actors, such as community-initiated militias, generates a distinct hope among the population that is often quickly dashed. Due to their distinct symbolic representation of civilian agency, militias are often remembered as heroic actors, which provides them with legitimacy and leads communities to quickly trust them anew to put an end to the violence. Instead of the common depiction of civilians as passive victims of war, violent and non-violent resistance against armed groups demonstrates how civilians can shape the dynamics of war (Krause et al. 2023). This hope, however, is often quickly disappointed as these militias become engulfed by the dynamics of war and reproduce conflict rather than end it. By making this claim, this article contributes to an (as of now) limited discussion about the consequences of civilian agency in war, showing that civilian-led initiatives, such as protests and unarmed or armed self-protection, do not always increase stability and civilian protection (Jentzsch 2023; Kaplan 2017; Van Baalen 2024).

Second, this article shows how repetition, in the form of the re-emergence of conflict actors, is not simply replication, as it always brings along change (see the Introduction to the special section). I show that one important change in the current manifestation of the Naparama is its political character: from strict loyalty to the government in the past to a more independent and ambiguous stance. Nowadays, the Naparama are much more associated with the political

opposition than with the government, as was the case during the civil war. This change shows that when new actors reenact prior forms of agency, they experiment and adapt to new circumstances. Being able to mobilize prior forms of agency allows communities to respond spontaneously to a crisis. Research on social movements refers to such prior forms of agency as “tactical repertoires” (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004; Tilly 2006). However, new contexts require experimentation and adaptation, especially when these contexts create extreme uncertainty such as during wartime. Hoffman (2011: 227) therefore argues that people in war need to be “inventive” to defend themselves. In Sierra Leone’s civil war, the Kamajor self-defense forces experimented and came up with a “creative technology.” The Kamajor, just like the Naparama, embraced a bullet-proofing vaccine as their new “inventive military tool.” Thus, even when communities embrace existing repertoires, they change them to better respond to new contexts and new challenges. This argument brings together social movement theory and civil war research to better understand tactical innovation and adaptation in civil war, contributing to our understanding of different forms of civilian self-protection initiatives during wartime (Jentzsch and Masullo 2022; Krause et al. 2023; McAdam 1983).

The article adopts a historical approach to analyze the Naparama in its current manifestation and the evolution of this conflict actor throughout different conflicts. Since 2010, I have traveled to Mozambique regularly, including a long fieldwork period of 12 months in 2011–2012 and shorter fieldwork periods of two to three weeks in the years after. This has allowed me to obtain “snapshots” of different moments of the political situation related to conflict and to develop a longitudinal perspective. I have come to contend that more frequent, yet shorter stays are helpful in navigating ethical issues of fieldwork (Jentzsch 2022; Krause 2021; Nordstrom 1997) and having the methodological advantage of observing continuity and change. In this article, I make use of interviews conducted in central and northern Mozambique, archival work, newspaper articles, and NGO reports to explore the continuity and change of the contemporary manifestation of the Naparama in Mozambique. For data on the recent conflict, I collaborated with a local journalist who had family in the district affected by Naparama activity to collect the necessary information in sites that were difficult to travel to for me.¹ When I visited Mozambique in October 2023, it was impossible for me to leave the provincial capital of Pemba due to security reasons.² The journalist was able to conduct research in Balama district in December 2023/January 2024 and interviewed two traditional healers who had treated people with the Parama vaccine and participated in a vaccination ceremony.

In the next section, I will provide an overview of militias in Mozambique and the specific origin and role of the Naparama during the civil war (1976–1992). I will then explore what role the Naparama play in the current conflict and compare the historical and contemporary manifestations of the militia. I end the article with some concluding remarks that highlight the ambivalent character of community-initiated militias whose historical legitimacy can provide the basis for a sense of pride in civilian agency (cf. Wood 2003) but at the same time be quickly abused by violently targeting rather than protecting community residents.

Naparama in the Past

Civilian mobilization for defense has been a common repertoire of community protection and state control over the population in Mozambique since colonial times (Bertelsen 2016; Macamo 2016; B. L. Machava 2018). The colonizer Portugal responded to the liberation movement Frelimo’s 10-year liberation war by forcibly relocating the population into well-guarded villages, where militias recruited from among the villagers patrolled the people (Reis and Oliveira 2012).

Frelimo set up liberated villages in northern Mozambique that they subsequently also protected through locally recruited militias. After independence, “popular militias” (*milícias populares*), one of several socialist mass organizations, became part of the socialist restructuring of society that Frelimo, the party in power, implemented (Hanlon 1984). In the early 1980s, during the 16-year civil war, these militias, under the command of the military, took on new roles as a first line of defense and protectors of the population in remote villages against the growing threat of the insurgent group Renamo (Jentsch 2022). In addition to the more formal militias, community initiatives, encouraged by local governments, armed community residents with spears and knives in an initiative of civilian self-protection (Lauriciano 1986; Lemia 2001).³

The civil war during which the government encouraged such self-protection began shortly after independence in 1975. The war had severe consequences for the lives and livelihoods of the rural population. Overall, the war led to the death of an estimated one million people and displacement of almost five million (Hanlon 1996: 16). Renamo, the insurgent group, was supported by neighboring Rhodesia, which had an interest in fighting liberation movements hiding in Mozambique (such as the Zimbabwe African National Union, ZANU). Renamo’s recruits were motivated by discontent with Frelimo’s socialist policies after independence (Vines 1991). After the end of white minority rule in Rhodesia in 1979, apartheid South Africa took over the support of Renamo. The insurgents moved from central into northern Mozambique in the early 1980s and soon after occupied much of the rural areas of the central and northern provinces (Dinerman 2001: 51; Do Rosário 2009: 305; Legrand 1993: 91–92). In 1986, the Mozambican government forces, together with armed forces from Zimbabwe and Tanzania, began a large-scale counteroffensive that returned all district towns to government control by July 1988. However, instability endured.

It was during this time, in the late 1980s, when Manuel António, a young man from the district of Namuno in Cabo Delgado province, formed the Naparama in the border region between Zambézia and Nampula provinces.⁴ António claimed that he had died of measles as a child, had been buried, and then was resurrected after seven days (Nordstrom 1997: 58; Waterhouse 1991: 14). He also claimed that he had spent six months in the mountains, where he had received a divine mission from Jesus Christ to liberate the Mozambican people from the suffering of the war and learned of a medicine to turn bullets into water (Nordstrom 1997: 58).⁵ The Naparama militia quickly recruited many youths who went through an initiation ritual:

30 youths were taken to be treated. [Manuel António] vaccinated us with razor blades. [He] cut our bodies with razor blades and put the medicine [into the wound]. Others he rubbed the whole body [with the medicine]. After all this, we were put to a test, [he] took sharpened machetes and attempted to cut [us], but because of the medicine, the machetes did not hurt us. He took a rifle and shot in our direction and nothing happened with us. And then we were told the rules that we had to respect. We paid five meticais for a small ceremony.⁶

New recruits were expected to follow certain rules that defined their behavior, such as avoiding bathing for a few days and eating certain foods. On the battlefield, the rules meant that Naparama combatants were “not allowed to look back, only look ahead; no one was allowed to be in front of the other; no fighting in the shade, always in the sun; if the enemy was in the shade, we were not allowed to be in the shade as well; ... we could not retreat when we heard shots, we had to go there where they [Renamo] were.”⁷ All deaths among the Naparama combatants were explained by reference to violations of these rules.

The Naparama spread to various districts in Zambézia and Nampula provinces to support the government forces in patrolling villages and protecting the civilian population, but the positive effects of their efforts did not last long (Jentsch 2018; Pereira 1999: 86). By 1991, the Naparama

comprised several thousand members, had spread to two-thirds of the northern territory, and had helped to limit violence against civilians (Wilson 1992). However, once the Renamo insurgents overcame their initial surprise, they staged a counteroffensive, partly with their own militias formed by traditional healers (Jentsch 2017). The Naparama leader António was killed in battle in December 1991, after which the Naparama lost their significance. The war ended with a peace agreement between Frelimo and Renamo that was signed in Rome in October 1992.

In stark contrast to the contemporary manifestation of the Naparama and their relation to the government, the local governments in the late 1980s did not directly embrace the new militia. Due to the socialist politics of the party in power, Frelimo, which had abolished all things traditional, the district administrators were suspicious of the Naparama's activities, even though they knew that they needed a local force like the Naparama to succeed against Renamo.⁸ For example, before the Naparama's leader in Zambézia, Manuel António, could work in Mocuba district in Zambézia province, the district administration demanded he confirm that his goal was not money or political power, but only the protection of the population.⁹ Once the government was convinced of the Naparama's loyalty, district administrations supported recruitment efforts and operations. In Lugela district in Zambézia and Murrupula and Mecubúri districts in Nampula province, Frelimo party secretaries were actively involved in finding suitable candidates for being initiated into the local Naparama force. In some districts, Naparama forces even replaced local army units, such as in Mecubúri in Nampula province.¹⁰ In newspaper interviews, Manuel António declared his loyalty to Frelimo and that he had always been with Frelimo, though signs of tensions existed (Borges 1992).

Even though the impact and relevance of the Naparama's action were clear at the district level, at the provincial or national level, the government never officially acknowledged their collaboration with the Naparama. Frelimo was a Marxist-Leninist party that had abolished traditional leaders after independence and was thus not keen on officially supporting a traditional force. Even though the party had abandoned all references to Marxism-Leninism at its party congress in 1989 and changed its attitudes toward traditional authorities in the early 1990s, its official stance toward the Naparama did not change. Rather, they adopted a pragmatic stance of tolerating Naparama activity in the districts to help the war effort. This reflected a long-term divergence between official and actual Frelimo policy regarding traditional authorities and healers after independence. Due to limited state capacity and the "reciprocal assimilation" of traditional and local government elites after independence, Frelimo's socialist anti-tribalism stance had long been compromised (Dinerman 2006: 22).

For Frelimo, it was therefore convenient to adopt a pragmatic stance of toleration of Naparama activity, which reflected prior practice in northern Mozambique. This informal arrangement prevented the Naparama from being considered a party to the conflict during the peace negotiations between Frelimo and Renamo, and they were therefore not included in post-war demobilization programs (Coelho and Vines 1992). The lack of recognition led to several waves of mobilization after the war. In early August 1994, about three hundred to four hundred Naparama combatants staged protests to receive the same demobilization benefits as government soldiers and Renamo combatants and marched on Quelimane, but the protest was resolved after they met with the provincial governor (BBC 1994a, 1994b). In 2011, the Naparama joined the protests against the new statute of former combatants, which did not recognize militiamen as war veterans and was passed by the Assembly of the Republic in May 2011. The leader of the *Mozambican Forum of Demobilized Soldiers*, Hermínio dos Santos, led the protests, demanding a monthly pension of 12,000 meticaís (about 440 US dollars at the time) for every war veteran, including those of the *milícias populares* (popular militias) and the Naparama (AIM 2011). These protests provided the Naparama with some temporary visibility, but the government never made the demanded concessions.

In sum, while the Naparama became a prominent force during the civil war, it was not the first time that communities were organized into defense forces. We can therefore recognize a few continuities of conflict. What contributed to the continuation of militias (*sites*) in Mozambique was the socialist orientation and the population-centered form of counterinsurgency (*process*). This political orientation in which the Naparama were embedded ensured that, even though the government never fully acknowledged the contribution of the Naparama, the militia had a close and relatively stable relation with the government (*content*). The content of conflict continuities is one of the important differences in comparison to the contemporary manifestation of the Naparama, to which I will turn now.

Naparama in the Present

The jihadist insurgency to which the contemporary Naparama militias responded turned violent in October 2017 with attacks against police posts to free prisoners in the district of Moçimboa da Praia, in the northern-most province of Cabo Delgado (Habibe et al. 2019; Morier-Genoud 2020). The insurgents belonged to an Islamist group that had emerged quietly in a village among mosque attendees who felt marginalized and sought to retreat from the state and then felt compelled to express their discontent in a more open, confrontative manner (Bonate 2024; Habibe et al. 2019; Morier-Genoud 2020). The armed group called itself *Ansar Al-Sunna* or *Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jamaa* and was locally known as *Al-Shabab* or *mashababe*.¹¹ The conflict escalated thereafter, and by 2018, the group had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS) and in June 2019, ISIS made the affiliation official by linking the group to the Islamic State of Central Africa Province (ISCAP). By 2020, the armed group had acquired the ability to capture resources and maintain territorial control in several districts of Cabo Delgado, and by 2022, ISIS recognized the group as a distinct province of the Islamic State, the Islamic State Mozambique Province (ISM).¹²

The government's response to the Islamist insurgency had been unsuccessful in limiting the threat and protecting civilians (Chambe 2024).¹³ The government hired private military companies in 2019 to support the counterinsurgency effort, with limited success. It then agreed to military interventions by Rwanda and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to help fight the insurgency in mid-2021, which limited the violence but did not defeat the insurgency (Nhamirre 2021). At the same time, from 2018 onwards, community-initiated militias, primarily led by and comprised of veterans from the previous wars and known as local forces (*forças locais*), formed in the northern parts of the province to defend the local population. In November 2022, the Naparama, a different militia formed by traditional healers in the southwest of the province, joined the efforts to protect the population "in their own way" (Tsambe 2025).¹⁴

The first type of militia that emerged, the local forces, have been the most prominent militias. They were formed by Frelimo veterans of Mozambique's independence struggle in the Makonde area in the north of the province, in particular Mueda and Macomia districts, who mobilized their family members. The triggering moment for the local forces to emerge was an insurgent attack on the Mueda plateau in April 2020, which the Mozambican army was unable to counter. As such, local authorities armed war veterans and created a unit led by a former commander to respond to the insurgents (Nhantumbo, cited in Israel 2024: 13). Their exact number is difficult to estimate. In February 2022, a journalist from the weekly newspaper *Savana* estimated that there were more than four thousand militia members aged between 25 and 70 years, while other sources speak of just over five hundred (Africa Monitor Intelligence 2022; Nhantumbo 2022).

The local forces reproduced prior conflict actors, which was facilitated by the fact that Frelimo war veterans from previous wars are well organized. The local forces are linked to the veterans' association, the *Associação dos Combatentes da Luta de Libertação Nacional* (ACLLIN), which is an important social base for the Frelimo party in power. As such, we can identify the *sites* of conflict continuities in the form of groups of veterans, who build on their knowledge and experience from prior wars, and the *processes* of conflict continuities in the established networks, the veterans' associations, that pass on that knowledge to new generations.

In terms of the *content* of conflict continuities—who is considered friend and foe—the local forces' relation to the government is not clearcut. Due to the initial successes of the local forces in battles with the insurgents, the government embraced these local forces, encouraged further recruitment, and supported them with resources such as weapons, vehicles, and uniforms (Nhantumbo 2025). Mozambican President Filipe Nyusi officially endorsed the local forces when he handed out medals of honor to 235 militiamen in early 2022 (Miramar 2022).¹⁵ However, this recognition of the local forces was not uncontested. An amendment to the 2019 Law on National Defense and Armed Forces of Mozambique, which legalized the local forces and tied them to the command of the armed forces and was approved by parliament in December 2022 (LUSA 2022), generated much debate. On the one hand, there was support for a legal framework to stipulate the engagement with the irregular forces. Yet on the other hand, there was concern that this change would legitimize and empower these local forces and thereby deepen existing social tensions and escalate the armed conflict (Nhantumbo 2025). These concerns were not unfounded. Even though the local forces have been tied to the government, their operations exhibit tendencies to operate more independently. They have also protected the population from violence by Mozambican armed forces, and they have served as local guides to the Rwandan military mission that arrived in July 2021 (Nhantumbo 2025).

The second type of militia that emerged are the Naparama (or *Nampharama*), which reminded journalists and analysts of the Naparama of the 16-year civil war between the Frelimo government and the Renamo insurgents. Indeed, the contemporary Naparama bear much resemblance to the former Naparama. To become a Naparama in the current war, recruits go through a similar ceremony as described above. During that ceremony, they receive a vaccination: a potion made of leaves and herbs is sprinkled into small wounds on the chest and back.¹⁶ After receiving the vaccine, they are considered to be invulnerable to bullets, just as their predecessors were during the civil war in the 1980s.

Reports of the first Naparama activity emerged on the social media platform WhatsApp in November 2022 shortly after insurgents had entered Namuno district on 29 October; these reports celebrated the Naparama's quick successes, reminding people of their heroic past. After the insurgents attacked Nanrupo, a village about 7 kilometers from Namuno town, on 10 November, the Naparama supposedly captured 19 insurgents and killed five (Cabo Ligado 2022a, 2023c). What contributed to the story of heroism and success was the fact that the Naparama were the first and only responders to the Islamist insurgents' first incursions into Namuno and Balama districts since the start of the armed conflict five years prior. These districts lie in the south of the province of Cabo Delgado and the insurgents' strongholds were concentrated in the northeast. It is a region with thick forests that are difficult to traverse and give mythical quality to stories about the Naparama's first manifestation. Residents claimed that the insurgents did not manage to properly attack Namuno and Balama because they got lost in the forests; they only saw fog, and this is how the Naparama managed to capture some of the insurgents.¹⁷

The Naparama seemed to be the only responders to the violence because the districts that the insurgents targeted in November 2022 are characterized by weak state presence, which explains the lack of response by government security forces. The conflict observatory Cabo Ligado

reports that only 20 police officers were present in Balama district at the time of the first attacks, joined by a detachment of the armed forces, which facilitated the insurgents' quick movements through these districts (Cabo Ligado 2022a). The attacks on Namuno district displaced about sixteen thousand people within 10 days, all displaced for the first time in this armed conflict (IOM 2022). The violence included the burning of homes, beheadings of civilians, and the abduction of women and girls (Cabo Ligado 2022a). The small victory by the Naparama over the insurgents was a welcome positive development but did not stop the insurgents from entering Balama district on 12 November 2022.

While the Naparama's activities created some optimism (and fascination), the insurgents quickly retaliated against the Naparama's resistance, which shows the fleeting strength of such a community-led force and the risk that it reproduces, rather than ends, armed conflict. In November 2022, the Naparama pursued about 20 insurgents far into the adjacent district of Montepuez to the north of Balama and Namuno, equipped only with bows and arrows; a clash led to several casualties and the insurgents captured and beheaded five Naparama, of which photos circulated online (Cabo Ligado 2022b; Nhantumbo 2025). On 30 November 2022, insurgents captured a peasant and sent him back to his village in Namuno to warn that they would avenge the death of their comrades, killed by the Naparama weeks earlier (Nhantumbo 2025). Insurgents killed another five Naparama on 31 January 2023 in Montepuez, and on the same day, they clashed with the Naparama in Meluco district and reportedly killed at least 14 (Cabo Ligado 2023b).

The insurgents' communications about these clashes show that they took the Naparama seriously as a sincere threat, as they attempted to demonstrate the militia's weakness. The Islamic State circulated photos of the 31 January killings on its social media channels and in the weekly newsletter *al-Naba*, and insurgents distributed two videos that showed the Naparama's dead bodies. In these videos, they warned people not to join the Naparama, "for their magic is nothing" (Cabo Ligado 2023e). After these events, the number of battles between insurgents and Naparama quickly decreased. Between February 2023 and January 2024, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), an organization that collects data on violent conflict, records no armed clashes between the Naparama and ISM, and it records five events without confirmed casualties since February 2024.¹⁸

This discussion shows how the continuation of conflict *sites* and *processes*—actors that rely on historical narratives and reproduce activities that promise special powers to confront the challenges of the current war—contributes to the continuation of violence. According to the local journalist I worked with and who conducted research in Balama district, the practice of being treated with a vaccine against the dangers of life has been present in the region for a long time. Traditional healers in the district explain that there are two ways to receive the Naparama vaccine: the first is to get the protection for personal purposes, and the second is to make use of the protection to defend the community and fight. Only the latter type of Naparama gets a "bengala," a wooden stick wrapped in red ribbons. This practice is actually not limited to wartime but has resurfaced whenever communities experienced some form of crisis: after contested national elections in 1999, for example, Montepuez district experienced riots in November 2000, in which the Naparama were involved in protests on the side of Renamo, the main opposition party that claimed electoral fraud on the part of the governing Frelimo party (Nacuo 2001).¹⁹ As the local journalist claimed, "every Naparama treatment has its motive, its purpose."²⁰ The Naparama adapt to current situations and threats.

An interesting difference from the prior manifestation of the Naparama, and break with the past, is the central role of an elderly woman in Namuno district who has treated most of the current Naparama members.²¹ Traditional healers explain that, usually, the knowledge

about the Parama vaccine is passed on from father to son, but this elderly woman is the only known woman to be able to prepare and use the vaccine, and she claims to have received the knowledge about the vaccine from a spirit.²² Residents in Namuno believe this elderly woman has special powers and can live in the river under water for a week; this is where she finds the plants and herbs that she uses to prepare the vaccine. She lives in the area between the two districts of Namuno and Balama, right by a mountain where lots of monkeys live. This is relevant, because in this context, monkeys are said to represent spirits. According to community members, the woman only uses her special powers when there are problems in the community or society. In this current war, she began by treating the area to protect it from the war and when the war arrived, she treated youths to help protect the area. She appears to make some selection as to who she treats, as she seems to avoid treating youths who want to use their protection for opportunistic purposes like banditry. The youths treated with the vaccine for the protection of the community are given *bengalas* (the wooden sticks wrapped in red cloth) and taught distinct rules, such as not to engage in sexual relations in the open air, to refrain from eating sweet potato leaves, and to refrain from hiding or fleeing while fighting. The woman has gained such fame in the current conflict that even some local forces from Macomía district have been reported to have traveled to her to be vaccinated with the Parama vaccine (Cabo Ligado 2023f).

What is clear from these stories of re-emergence is that the Naparama evoke their heroic past to claim powerful and legitimate agency in the current conflict. This can be seen in Tsambe's (2025: 61–62) account of an initiation ceremony in November 2022 in the village of Meloco in Namuno district, led by a woman healer and two Naparama combatants and attended by local government officials and the local population.²³ One of the speakers at the ceremony, an elder who claimed to be a former combatant and militia member, evoked positive memories of the Naparama during the civil war. He emphasized that the Naparamas were not back, but “we were always here ... defending our lives and our land in our own way” (speech by Maulide Abacar, cited in Tsambe 2025: 62). He also explained that since the insurgents were prepared by making use of “roots” (traditional medicine), the local population needed to respond in the same way, by making use of their own roots. Overall, Tsambe's (2025) analysis shows the strong sense of agency that the population has always had and relied on when remobilizing the Naparama in the current war.

In terms of the *content* of conflict continuities, the friends and foes of conflict actors, there is a stark contrast to the initial suspicion that the Naparama faced during the civil war. The contemporary Naparama received quick support from local and provincial officials, who encouraged them to guard checkpoints and take over community policing tasks in Balama and Namuno districts (TVM 2022; Yussuf 2022a). After an attack in the district of Quissinga in September 2022, the police chief Bernardo Rafael encouraged the population to stay and resist, and to pursue the insurgents with spears and knives until the armed forces could arrive and support them (Achá 2022). The conflict observatory Cabo Ligado suggests that this call for vigilance and resistance could have been understood by the Naparama as a call for action (Cabo Ligado 2022b).

After this initial show of support, however, the collaboration between the Naparama, the police, and army has not always been smooth. The government considers the Naparama as part of the local forces (as Balama and Namuno did not have their own contingent of local forces) and has tried to control them in a similar way, but with little success. The Naparama usually prefer to conduct their operations alone, without coordination or collaboration with the police and armed forces.²⁴ The governor of the province of Cabo Delgado felt the need in January 2023 to remind the Naparama that they were not superior to the armed forces and needed to be subordinate to their command and coordinate their actions with them (Yussuf 2023). Problems of coordination and subordination also emerged in Ancuabe district in June 2023, where

the Rapid Intervention Unit (UIR) of the police rejected enforcing an 11 pm business curfew that Naparama forces had introduced (Cabo Ligado 2023d). According to analysts of the Cabo Ligado conflict observatory, the challenges seem to stem from the difficulty that there is not really an identified leader of the Naparama who can take over the training of recruits in discipline and human rights. In fact, there does not seem to be any form of (military) training. The traditional healers who vaccinate youths do not seem to take on a military command role. Given that the Naparama are essentially a leaderless movement, they can be corrupted and manipulated for political purposes.

This striving for autonomy and lack of control has led to numerous human rights abuses by the Naparama. For example, in a video recorded on 23 November 2022 in Montepuez, in the early phase of the new Naparama manifestation, a Naparama combatant celebrates the death of an alleged insurgent by mutilating a charred body and showing it to the cheering crowd around him (Cabo Ligado 2022b; Nhantumbo 2025). The Mozambican journalist Armando Nhantumbo reports that while pursuing insurgents into the district of Montepuez, Naparama killed three innocent people because they seemed suspicious to them (Nhantumbo 2025). The Naparama also killed a worker of a Chinese logging firm because they suspected the worker's tools to show that he was an insurgent. According to Nhantumbo (2025), the Naparama's manning of checkpoints has included massive abuses of civilians, whereby people are accused of being members of the insurgents. Such cases of violence led the district administrator of Namuno in December 2022 to call on the Naparama to stop these abuses and to coordinate with the police forces, especially when conducting patrols (Yussuf 2022b). The administrator reminded the Naparama that their task is to protect themselves and the community, and that if they suspect someone to be an insurgent, they should inform the police and not act independently (Nhantumbo 2025).

The Naparama's activities in the current armed conflict have led to their involvement in other types of crises, which has strengthened the impression that they are operating as a threat, rather than as a source of protection for civilians. In January 2024, the Naparama allegedly beat and stripped a nurse who they accused of spreading cholera in the community and then burned community leaders' houses (Cabo Ligado 2024b). They destroyed health posts and made local government officials flee to the bush.²⁵ The district administrator of Namuno complained that the Naparama go unpunished when they perpetrate these abuses (Integrity Magazine 2024). In March 2024, Naparama members beat three election officials to death, who were visiting the district of Chiúre to encourage people to register to vote, because they confused the election officials with insurgents (Gould 2024).

However, these events are not just instances of human rights abuses explained by a lack of control of the community-initiated militias. Rather, they are instances of a strong urge for autonomy, a pride in civilian agency, and a deep suspicion toward state infrastructure and state agents. It is not surprising that the contemporary Naparama feature prominently in local music videos that promote political opposition to the state in general and support for the opposition party Renamo in particular. A local musician from Chiúre produced several music videos in which people re-enact successful Naparama battles against the insurgents and whose lyrics celebrate the autonomy and independence of these forces that act without taking any order from the state. The current battle against the Islamist insurgents is compared to that against the Portuguese: people managed to "throw out Al-Shabab without your [the military's] help," like they did with the Portuguese during the anti-colonial war, and they did that with "our own methods and efforts [referring to the traditional sources of power]."²⁶ What these videos show is people's deep urge to determine their own lives and pride in doing so. Remobilizing the Naparama provides an opportunity to pursue this urge for autonomy.

Thus, in its contemporary form, the Naparama functions more as an “independent movement” that decides on its goals depending on the political situation and the “imminent problem” that needs to be addressed.²⁷ This can be seen in the most recent Naparama activities. Following the general elections in October 2024 in which Frelimo’s candidate for president was declared the winner, the Naparama became part of the massive countrywide mobilization against the Frelimo government to protest alleged election fraud. In November 2024, they even re-emerged in the province of Zambézia, the main location of their activities during the civil war between Renamo and Frelimo. A traditional healer named Racing led the group into the district of Inhassunge but shortly after died in a battle with Mozambican armed forces in Luabo (Jornal Txopela 2025). The brutal killing of an army reserve officer in Morrumbala by suspected Naparama shocked observers, but opposition politicians saw this as a response to the high levels of killings by police forces in the aftermath of the contested elections (Delfim 2025). Naparama have also resurfaced in Nampula province, such as in the district of Malema where they have attacked government offices and created insecurity (R. Machava 2025).

Since these recent manifestations of the Naparama significantly differ from the past, and since the past is remembered in heroic terms, community residents, analysts, and even politicians have debated whether the current Naparama are “authentic.” In communities in which the Naparama are active, news of Naparama combatants perpetrating violence, or of Naparama dying in battle, are often explained by referring to their divergence from their local roots. For example, some characterize the current Naparama as opportunists who seek to personally benefit from the current crisis (Issufo 2025). Tsambe (2025: 68–70) reports on his conversations with community residents in Montepuez, who commented on the state of the war in 2022, in the early days of the Naparama’s manifestation. A traditional healer claimed that the Naparama that were killed by insurgents were not “theirs,” as they might have been treated by a different healer; moreover, they were far away, and it was difficult to know what really happened. Market sellers were disappointed by the Naparama’s lack of success against the insurgents. They questioned the power of the vaccine and pointed to different forms of organization of the current Naparama, noting that they recruited youths from different villages, which led to people not knowing and not trusting each other and then accidentally killing the wrong persons. The defense minister Cristovão Chume accused the perpetrators of recent attacks against state institutions of being “bandits” rather than Naparama and promised to “eliminate” them (LUSA/MBC TV 2025). This concern about the lack of connection to the roots and origins of the Naparama shows what a local phenomenon it is and the importance of this local connection in making the group a legitimate political force.

Concluding Remarks

While the Naparama of the past and the Naparama of the present share important similarities, the continuity in conflict actors does not necessarily represent replication of the same war dynamics. The knowledge of traditional community self-protection strategies in times of crises is transmitted through time and spread across communities with a similar cultural background; most of the Naparama in the past and present are part of the Makua, the largest ethnic group in Mozambique. Civilian self-protection practices remain salient and are activated in difficult situations such as war.

Moreover, the emergence of the Naparama in the past and present is met with a similar sense of hope and pride in civilian agency and power over seemingly more powerful armed opponents. But in both the past and the present, this hope quickly diminishes and is replaced with

violence. While during the civil war, this renewed violence was mostly due to the revenge of the armed group Renamo, in the current armed conflict, the Naparama themselves have contributed to the continuity of violent conflict. The re-emergence of the Naparama has not helped end the current conflict and protect civilians but has led to an increase in attacks on civilians. This is also due to the fact that in rural insurgencies, rebels hide among the population, and it is difficult to distinguish between insurgents and civilians (Kalyvas 2006). Given the limited training and lack of leadership and coordination, the contemporary Naparama have privileged vigilance over due diligence, meaning that they frequently attack the wrong people.

An important difference from the former manifestation of the Naparama is the fact that the contemporary Naparama take a much more independent political stance. In contrast to the civil war's Naparama, the contemporary militias are not closely tied to the local administrative structure and do not display strong loyalties to the political and military leadership. Rather, the contemporary Naparama take their autonomy seriously, even celebrate it, and seek to protect communities against the infringement of foreigners and the state. In a way, they symbolize strong civilian agency, but without the limits and accountability of a properly organized, community-led force. In that sense, they abuse the level of agency they possess and can therefore redirect their attention to whatever they perceive as emerging threats. Once empowered in this way, such militias pose severe challenges for peace, not only during wartime but also peacetime.

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■ NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion of the methods and ethics of fieldwork on the historical Naparama, see Jentzsch (2022, Chapter 3). I do not disclose the journalist's name that I worked with to study the current manifestation of the Naparama to ensure their protection while working on sensitive issues.
2. It has become extremely difficult to conduct fieldwork in rural areas of Cabo Delgado, not only for non-Mozambicans, due to the government's restriction of access. Working with local colleagues has the advantage of gaining better insights into customs and norms, in addition to gaining access. But it also limits the researcher's input on the interview content and process, as interesting leads might not

- be pursued. The local colleague became a main informant for me and gave me information that came from many different sources, such as interviews, participant observation, informal conversations, and (social) media.
3. There is by now a comprehensive literature in political science on civilian self-protection strategies that mostly focuses on non-violent means of protection but increasingly considers violent forms of protection (Jose and Medie 2015, 2016; Kaplan 2017; Krause et al. 2023; Masullo 2021).
 4. Depending on the local language and pronunciation, the spelling varies: Naprama, Parama, Napharama, Barama (Wilson 1992: 561, fn. 148). Naparama means “irresistible force” in the language of the Macua, the largest linguistic group in northern Mozambique (Finnegan 1992: 254). “Parama” denotes the drug that is used during the vaccination, and “Naparama” denotes the people that received the vaccine Parama (Informal conversation with the late Naparama leader in Zambézia, Manuel Sabonete, 16 September 2011, Nicoadala).
 5. Interview with former Naparama combatant, 2011-09-30-Nm20, Nicoadala, Zambézia.
 6. Interview with former Naparama combatant, 2011-09-09-Nm2, Nicoadala, Zambézia.
 7. Interview with former Naparama combatant, 2011-09-09-Nm2, Nicoadala, Zambézia.
 8. Mozambique’s administrative units include provinces, districts, and municipalities.
 9. Interview with former Naparama leader, 2012-06-06-Nm46, Lugela, Zambézia.
 10. Interview with former Naparama combatants, 2011-10-26-Nm29, Nahipa, Mecubúri, Nampula; 2011-10-16-Nm-24, Mecubúri, Nampula; 2011-10-22-Nm27, Mecubúri, Nampula. Interview with local government official, 2011-10-17-Gf1, Mecubúri, Nampula.
 11. See Israel (2024, fn. 1: 113) for an explanation of the origins of the local name and the note that by 2020, the group simply called itself Islamic State.
 12. See an overview of the evolution of the group from the conflict observatory Cabo Ligado (Bofin 2023).
 13. For an overview of the history and dynamics of the conflict, see the recent special issue in *Kronos* (50:1).
 14. In other work, I distinguish between state-initiated and community-initiated militias, the former being forces created by state agents to serve state counterinsurgent purposes, the latter being formed by communities for local protection purposes (Jentzsch 2022). This distinction relates to the moment of formation; states can co-opt community-initiated militias, and state-initiated militias can become more independent over time.
 15. For an overview of the local forces, see Cabo Ligado (2023a).
 16. Interview with local journalist, July 2024.
 17. Interview with local journalist, July 2024. This is a typical trope in northern Mozambique of how the use of magical powers limits the enemy’s capabilities. See Israel (2024).
 18. See <https://www.acleddata.com>; one such clash took place in Chiúre on 16 February 2024, with (unconfirmed) casualties on both sides (Cabo Ligado 2024a). A battle in Ancuabe on 2 March 2024 caused seven casualties among the Naparama and two among insurgents (Cabo Ligado 2024c). This decrease in violent clashes is probably due to the fact that the insurgents moved north again, and so there was little armed activity in the south during that time; gruesome pictures of dead Naparamas might also have deterred youths from becoming and fighting as a Naparama (Interview with Thomas Quéface, head of Cabo Ligado in Mozambique, Maputo, 16 November 2023; Interview with Armando Nhantumbo, Maputo, 17 November 2023).
 19. A traditional healer in Balama that the journalist I worked with interviewed in December 2023 claimed that he had prepared the Naparama for the protests in Montepuez.
 20. Interview with local journalist, July 2024.
 21. Interview with local journalist, July 2024.
 22. This is consistent with the origin story of the Parama vaccine in which a person dies, resuscitates, and then returns with a message from God to use a specific medicine for the protection of people. See Jentzsch (2022).
 23. It is unclear whether the woman who attended this ceremony is the same as the one written about above.

24. Interview with local journalist, July 2024.
25. Interview with local journalist, July 2024. Suspicions surrounding health workers and cholera have a long history in Mozambique (Serra 2003).
26. See “Dj Muringa nihowomola oficial vídeo,” <https://youtu.be/Q7B5cdyZxaY?feature=shared>. The lyrics in the local language Makua, mixed with other languages, were translated for me by the journalist I worked with in December 2023.
27. Interview with local journalist, July 2024.

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