

The Mother of Awashi: Violence and Virtuality in the War for Cabo Delgado (Mozambique)

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Abstract

In September 2020, a video circulating on social media plunged the country of Mozambique into a deep moral crisis. The video showed five young men, dressed in the uniform of the Mozambican army, cruelly whipping a naked woman along a road and eventually riddling her with bullets. The clip came from the war zone of Cabo Delgado, in the north of the country, where an insurgency labelled as Islamist has raged since October 2017. It was the sixth video of its kind leaked in the space of a few weeks – and the most brutal, because it depicted violence against a harmless civilian. Immediately, the internet was abuzz with grief. Various versions of the circumstances of the shooting emerged. A fierce debate erupted about the morality of the war. Pressured by Amnesty International to institute an inquiry into the matter, the Mozambican government dismissed the video as “subversive propaganda” and “montage”. By engaging in a micro-analysis of the harrowing incident of the “mother of Awashi” – the crossroads village where the woman was shot dead – this article aims to reflect on the entanglement between violence and virtuality in the “new war” being fought in Cabo Delgado.

Keywords: Mozambique, Cabo Delgado, jihadism, violence, social media, new war

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About the author

Paolo Israel is an Associate Professor in the Department of Historical Studies of the University of the Western Cape. They have twenty years of research experience in northern Mozambique. Their monograph *In Step with the Times: Mapiko Masquerades of Mozambique* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014) charts the twentieth-century trajectory of a tradition of masquerading. Their most recent work is the ethnographic novel *The War of Lions: A Witch-hunt in the Heartland of the Mozambican Revolution* (Chicago: HAU Books, forthcoming). At the core of their research interests are songs, performance, magic, political violence, liberation history, and experimental writing.

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Ethics statement

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Muduniani ukalola

Vatubyaidya wetu valume

Nkati mudunia

Vanyaku' mapinde valume

Vayaku' mashoka valume

In the world, if you consider it

Who kills us, it's the men

In the world

Who carries the bows, it's the men

Who carries the axes, it's the men

Popular song, first recorded in 2004 (Israel 2014, 2011), sung by a group of displaced women in Pemba, September 2023.

“This is the habit”

In the film *Concerning Violence*, Gayatri Spivak takes the image of a nursing woman mutilated by a napalm bomb, dropped by a Portuguese jet during the struggle for the liberation of Mozambique (1964–1974), as an icon of colonial violence: “The black Venus”, as she calls her, “reminding us of the Venus of Milo with her arm gone, who is also a black Madonna, suckling a child with bare breasts” (Spivak 2014). If there is an icon of the “new war” (Kaldor 2012) that has raged in the Mozambican province of Cabo Delgado since October 2017, spurred by an Islamist group known locally as Al-Shabab, it is that of the naked woman who was shot down mercilessly by young men bearing the uniform of the Mozambican army near the crossroads of Awashi, in the north of the province.¹ The death was all the more disturbing because it was recorded on video. This incident precipitated a moral crisis about the nature of the war, of the State, and of truth itself.

The clip was leaked on social media, probably by one of the perpetrators, on September 14, 2020, to nationwide consternation and grief.² It shows four soldiers following a naked woman – presumably a mother³ – on

an open road. The death sentence is already decided. “Whip her before,” one soldier says, “then kill her ahead, there. Kill her under that mango tree.” The tree stands solitary among dried grasses, a few metres to the left of the road. One soldier whips the woman with a long cane. Another one repeats: “It’s a habit! This is the habit! Whip this one!” One warns: “And then, don’t jest. Don’t feel pity.” The accents of the perpetrators are mixed: one speaks Portuguese with the heavy consonants typical of the northern Emakhuwa language, another swears using a characteristically southern expression. The woman tries in vain to escape the thrashing and the execution, veering away from the fateful tree and back onto the road. The soldiers try to drive her back towards the tree: “Let’s go! There, there, there – go there!” She cowers; her bowels give way. “It’s an Al-Shabab, this one,” one soldier decides. “Fuck it. Get out. Move.” And right there on the road, the woman is mowed down by multiple machine-gun volleys. “Enough,” one soldier says. “Whore,” another one adds. The executioners rejoin another group of their comrades. “That’s it, brother. Done. They’ve killed an Al-Shabab.” At the end of the harrowing two-minute clip, the hand that holds the camera turns to frame a crooked smile and two fingers spread to form the sign of victory.

¹ Toponymy in Mozambique is unstable. The village is generally referred to as Awassi, Auasse, or even Oasse. Its correct name in Shimakonde, the language predominantly spoken there, is kuna-Awashi. For ease, I omit the locative prefix (*kuna-*).

² The video can be seen on the X (formerly Twitter) account of Mozambican human rights activist Zeinada Machado, <https://x.com/zenaidamz/status/1305433447276703744> (accessed April 1, 2024).

³ Should one look at a suffering human body as an object

of forensic analysis? Is it justified by the will to do justice to memory? Many commentators remarked that the woman’s sagging breasts indicated that she had nursed more than one child.

New wars, old violence

The constellation of factors that led to the eruption of a jihadist insurgency in northern Mozambique is by now well defined.⁴ Since the first decade of the third millennium, youths from the coastal areas of Cabo Delgado, especially from the Mwani ethnic group, had been drawn to radical political Islam by exposure to regional jihadist networks and the preachings of Kenyan cleric Aboud Rogo.⁵ These discourses took hold amongst these youths on account of an entrenched social and economic marginalization, in a context in which access to the postcolonial state in the province had been largely monopolized by the Christian Makonde, protagonists of the anti-colonial liberation struggle (1964–1974) and socialist revolution (1975–1990). The discovery of massive natural resources in the province – gas, rubies, and graphite especially – served to fuel the smouldering embers of these grievances. An already corrupt post-socialist elite turned to land dispossession and unbridled capitalistic plunder. Pre-existing networks of illegal smuggling – of timber and heroin, especially – provided easy sources of funding for the insurgents. War offered more opportunities for profiteering to the elites and deepened the sense of popular alienation. Rather than a single predominant cause, the insurgency was generated and sustained by a field of accelerating forces: radicalization, marginalization, ethno-political cleavages, smuggling, endemic corruption, the resource curse, land dispossession, state fragility, and the emergence of a war economy.

To the above, one should add an entrenched history of political violence, an element that rarely gets mentioned in the growing

literature on the conflict in Cabo Delgado. This province experienced the various cycles of violence that have characterized the history of Mozambique with heightened intensity.⁶ From the mid-18th century until the early 20th, northern Mozambique was blighted by slavery, which radically restructured the fabric of social life (Alpers 1975; Medeiros 1988; Israel 2024a). Slavery generated a polarity between the Muslim coastal populations, who actively participated in the trade, and the hinterland people, who were more often its victims. Cabo Delgado was then subdued and governed by the *Companhia do Nyassa*, a multinational concessionary company infamous for its ruthless methods. In 1929, the dictatorial *Estado Novo* took over. Portuguese colonialism was especially prone to brutality, symbolized by the infantilizing *palmatória*, the public beating of hands or feet with a wooden paddle. The Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (Frelimo) openly embraced revolutionary violence in its ten-year anti-colonial struggle, whose main battleground was Cabo Delgado. The colonial state responded with counterinsurgency measures, including surveillance, torture, and mass killings (Dhadha 2020). When Frelimo became a one-state socialist party, it relied on a “politics of punishment” (Machava 2011) which included reeducation, public shaming, forced displacement, flogging, and extra-judicial executions (Bertelsen 2011). The anti-government movement Renamo (Mozambican National Resistance) made wide use of maiming and torture throughout Mozambique’s 16-year civil conflict (1977–1992). Renamo moved into Cabo Delgado in the 1980s and found there fertile ground among people dissatisfied with Frelimo’s ruling. Renamo’s methods were promptly imitated by the state army, with the population caught between the hammer and the anvil.⁷ Punishment and brutality

⁴For a review of the literature on the insurgency, see especially Bonate et al. 2024; and Bonate 2024.

⁵The Mwani of Cabo Delgado are closely linked to Indian Ocean Swahili networks, Kimwani itself being a dialect of Kiswahili. On the religious aspect of the insurgency, see especially Habibe et al. (2019), Bonate (2022, 2024), and Morier-Genoud (2020).

⁶On the history of Cabo Delgado, see, among others, Medeiros (1997), West (2005), Adam (2006), and Israel (2014).

⁷For these dynamics, see Morier-Genoud et al. (2018),

carried on throughout the democratic dispensation, even though some of the structures responsible for inflicting it – especially village militias – were gradually disempowered or dissolved. Therefore, the scars of past violence in Cabo Delgado run deep. It is no exaggeration to say that, whether as victim, perpetrator, or bystander, virtually nobody was free from exposure.⁸

When the new insurgency exploded in the province in October 2017, the scars reopened, the dispositions reactivated, and the structures were strengthened anew.⁹ The insurgents, who called themselves Al-Shabab ('the youths'), possibly as a homage to the Somali equivalent, recurred to methods of terror pioneered during the civil war, especially violence against civilians and state authorities. The government's response was equally brutal. In the aftermath of the first attacks, villages suspected of harbouring insurgents were shelled by helicopters and even a battleship. Indiscriminate mass arrests were carried out. The province was abuzz with rumours of summary executions and mass graves.¹⁰ While, in the first two years, the insurgents limited themselves to raids on remote villages, after their allegiance (*bayat*) to the Islamic State in July 2019, their military endeavours escalated too. In February 2020, they took on a contingent of the Mozambican military in open battle.¹¹ In March, they stormed and briefly occupied the town of Mocimboa da Praia, where

the insurgency had begun. In April, they invaded and sacked Muidumbe, heartland of the liberation struggle, slaughtering over 50 civilians in the village of Shitashi. The towns of Macomia, Quissanga, and Mucojo came next. Abductions and beheadings multiplied. In June and then again in August, the insurgents returned to Mocimboa in a concerted military operation, from the land and the sea, routing the military and de facto occupying the town. The Mozambican government reluctantly armed local militias – especially in the pro-Frelimo Makonde areas – who often carried out summary executions. Thus, the insurgency of Cabo Delgado rapidly evolved into a "new war" (Kaldor 2012; Hansen 2021): an asymmetrical conflict in which civilians become legitimate targets of terror from multiple belligerents. As we will see, this violence had a stark gendered dimension (Feijó 2021a, 2021b).

This escalation of violence went hand in hand with its virtualization. The insurgents posted videos and images on social media, or on the Islamic State's official outlets, depicting snippets of military actions, propaganda speeches, and beheadings. The Mozambican government, gradually acknowledging the existence of a "terrorist threat" that it had previously denied, responded by circulating images of dead insurgents and (re)captured weaponry.¹² Reacting against the government's silencing of independent journalism, social networks, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, became a vibrant forum for the sharing of information and commentary. Displaced people recurred to digital communication – especially voice notes – to learn about the whereabouts of their dear ones or the fate of their homes and villages (Israel 2024b). Gradually, social

who, however, tend to downplay Renamo's violence.

⁸ This affirmation, which might appear sweeping, is based on 20 years of research and frequentation of the province. I am still to meet someone who was not, in one way or another, affected by these high levels of violence. The generation born from the mid-1990s onwards was to be the first violence-free one: that hope has been sorely betrayed by the current war.

⁹ About the insurgency in Cabo Delgado, see especially Habibe et al. (2019); Morier-Genoud (2020); Feijó (2021a); and Bonate (2022, 2024).

¹⁰ This is based on fieldwork observations carried out in December 2017, in Mueda, Muidumbe, and Macomia.

¹¹ This was in the village of Mbau, near Mocimboa da Praia.

¹² Especially in the initial phase, the insurgents relied largely on weapons stolen from the Mozambican army. See <https://www.calibreobscura.com/the-weaponry-of-is-central-africa-pt-1-insurgents-in-mozambique/> (accessed June 16, 2024).

networks became the major arena in which the war was apprehended and discussed.

In this respect, the case of Cabo Delgado is not extraordinary, but paradigmatic. Conflict in the 21st century has been fundamentally shaped by Web 2.0, to the point that scholars today refer to “digital militarism” (Kunstman and Stein 2015; Merrin 2019) and “iWar” (Pözsche 2014; Patrikarakos 2017). In the African context, a budding literature has explored the interconnections between jihadist movements and social media.¹³ The phenomenon is multi-dimensional. Social networks shape trans-local political constituencies and communities of affect; can be used as tools of mobilization, propaganda, and surveillance; and project conflicts far beyond geographical borders. More importantly, the instantaneous and ephemeral nature of Web 2.0 has exacerbated the tendency, already described by theorists such as Baudrillard and Virilio, for war to be enmeshed with virtuality. One no longer has to embrace some armchair version of French poststructuralism to agree to this. In the new iteration, the virtual construction of reality occurs in the realm of praxis. The presence of handheld digital devices in the field of war prompts actors to perform – and witness to – violence *with* and *for* the camera. The new guerrilla wields the machine gun in one hand and the smartphone in the other. Diffusion and feedback are instantaneous and rhizomatic.

In the following pages, I trace the entanglement of violence and virtuality in the war in Cabo Delgado through a close analysis of the case of the “mother of Awashi”. This analysis is based on an archive of social media – composed of videos, voice notes, images, and screenshots – that I have assembled over a number of years, via participation on a number of platforms, especially grassroots

WhatsApp groups.¹⁴ Due to the ephemeral nature of social media, this archive is necessarily fragmentary, even haphazard. I engage with this material via storytelling: my method is to join the fragments into a narrative that gives rise to critical questions. This requires me to tread the thin line between the desire to analyse and denounce violence, and the risk of reproducing it or indulging it.

The objective of this narrative is twofold. In the first place, I aim to contribute with a detailed case study to the expanding literature on digital militarism, especially in the context of African jihadi insurgencies, which demonstrates the entanglement of violence and virtuality in new wars.¹⁵ Secondly, I wish to highlight the impact of state violence on the conflict in Cabo Delgado. The incident at Awashi dramatically exposed the state of disarray and the propensity for abuse in the Mozambican army: its inability not only to contain the conflict, but to relate in any meaningful way to the civil populations it is supposed to protect.

Gender played a crucial role both in the perpetration of violence and in its mediatic reverberations. Rape has been used as a weapon of war by all belligerents.¹⁶ The Mozambican army is especially prone to it, while the Al-Shababs favour kidnapping and forced marriages. Women, however, also play an active part in the insurgency, often against their will, as spies, infiltrators, carriers of weapons, and even fighters, much as happened during

¹³ For the case of Boko Haram, see, among others, Chiluwa and Adegoke (2013); Ogbondah and Agbese (2018); Agbo (2019). For the Sahel, see Togola and de Bruijn (2023).

¹⁴ All these media were shared on public social media platforms or groups. I have obtained formal ethics clearance for working with this material from the University of the Western Cape. All material has been duly anonymized. All translations from Portuguese are mine. For further discussion of the ethical quandaries of working with social media in a context of war, see Israel (2024b).

¹⁵ For a similar case study, which discusses the reverberations of a single image of violence in the eastern DRC, see Graham (2019).

¹⁶ There is a broad literature on the intersection of masculinities and war. See, among others, Myrtilinen et al. (2025).

Mozambique's liberation war. Therefore, the debates around the video focused around the question of the place of a woman's body in war, as victim, accomplice, or in-between. And while the tragedy at Awashi repeated the dialectic between the excessive visualization of women's bodies and the silencing of their voices which has operated in Africa since colonial times (Hayes 2005, 521–523), women's voices – even a possibly fictitious one – also contributed significantly to the debate.

Finally, this is a form of memory-work (Haug 1992): a testament to a victim of war in a context of enduring gendered violence and state silencing. Perhaps as a reaction to shrinking democratic freedom in Mozambique, a recent article has endorsed the government's denial of the murder at Awashi as a case of "misinformation" (Tsandzana 2024, 68–69), against overwhelming evidence to the contrary.¹⁷ This is a case in which, as Walter Benjamin cogently put it, "*even the dead will not be safe*" (2007, 255).

"We have more trash to show you"

The outburst of violence that culminated with the murder of the woman of Awashi came as no surprise to anyone who was paying attention to social media. Since before the outbreak of the insurgency, social networks had functioned as a vehicle to denounce military and police brutality – a phenomenon as commonplace in Mozambique as it is difficult to document.¹⁸ Videos popped up denouncing

abuses, especially buttock flogging, the police's signature punishment, which was never abolished in practice in many communal villages of Cabo Delgado.¹⁹ Perhaps the most revealing of these clips came from the ruby mines of Montepuez, where illegal miners (*garimpeiros*) who had been apprehended were subjected to a concerted ordeal of beatings and debasement.²⁰ The technique was strikingly reminiscent of the ones used in socialist reeducation camps (Machava 2025). The miners had to spank themselves; smack each other, saying "thank you chief" (*obrigado chefe*); or repeat aloud, while standing with their legs half-bent under a scorching sun: "I am a thief."

In the *annus horribilis* of 2020, while the insurgents wreaked havoc on Cabo Delgado, social media began to bubble with paranoia and rumour. Gruesome pictures of beheadings and massacres circulated, many of which turned out to come from the Eastern Congo.²¹ The government did its best to let pass under silence war casualties from the "northern operational theatre".²² Often even the families of the deceased were kept in the dark.²³ In March, a message made the rounds, warning the youths of Maputo not to go out late at night,

¹⁹ I witnessed to several of these punishments being administered by village militias in the district of Muidumbe between 2002 and 2008.

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFu8MWVPf5k> (accessed June 16, 2024). On violence related to ruby mining in Montepuez, see, among others, Chambe (2021).

²¹ These photographs and videos are part of my archive. Language, uniforms, setting, etc. identified them as coming from the Kivu.

²² *Teatro operacional norte*, as the war is known in technical jargon.

²³ I was contacted, for instance, by a young woman whose husband disappeared after the attack at Mbau of February 2020. The government would not come clear as to the whereabouts of her husband. Observing the photograph of an insurgent whose face was draped in a shawl, the woman convinced herself that her husband had been kidnapped and made into an insurgent. I could not see the similarity between the two faces and I could not help her further.

¹⁷ The article states, without providing a shred of evidence and against all forensic analysis, that "the information shared at the time indicated that it was information created to provoke fear or discredit the work done by the Mozambican armed forces, given that the terrorists had also worn the same uniform as the Mozambican military to create confusion about their identity" (Tsandzana 2004, 69).

¹⁸ The website <https://www.mozambiquehistory.net>, curated by archivist and historian Colin Darch, has a wealth of primary sources on political violence and punishment in the socialist period.

to avoid forced conscription. The story was reminiscent of experiences suffered by many during the socialist period, when unemployed youths or prostitutes were rounded up by the military and sent to reeducation camps or to remote rural areas in the province of Niassa (Azevedo 2012; Machava 2025):

All youngsters of my Whatsapp!
There is a silent recruitment which
is happening here in Maputo, the
soldiers patrol at night, and the
youths who are found in the street
in the wee wee hours are recruited
by force, whoever resists will be
thrashed, they want 20k youths
to go to the war in the north, so
brother and friends, don't go out at
night, you risk being recruited, and
even worse your families won't have
any knowledge of your disappear-
ance [...] ! Spread the news!

Social media also provided evidence of frictions between the soldiers and the civil populations. A video circulating in January 2020 showed a group of young Makonde men chasing after soldiers while singing a ritual song. Voice notes sent from the war zones indicated that many soldiers fled when confronted by the insurgents, shedding their weapons and uniforms, trying to mingle with the local population, to avoid a brutal death (Israel 2024b). In April, a video showing the police flogging passersby in the Muslim neighbourhood of Paquitequite, in Pemba, moved 17 civil society organizations to write a letter to President Nyusi, denouncing “abuses and violations of human rights, namely extrajudicial executions, arbitrary imprisonment and denial of access to information.”²⁴ Meanwhile, the soldiers themselves took advantage of social networks

to vent, giving worrying signals of becoming unhinged. A number of these videos circulated on social networks in the months preceding September.

Two young soldiers film each other in a grassland dotted by cashew trees. Another one sits on a tree in the background. Machine guns lie on stands on the ground. The speaker is in uniform, socks, and plastic sandals. “We are here,” he goes, pacing the clearing, “in the northern operational theatre. We are on a mission, in which we don't know what we are protecting. The same insurgents that...” he stammers and breaks into laughter, together with the comrade who is filming, “are sitting there” – and he points to the bush. “Now it's” – he checks his phone – “8.42 and not even a breakfast. We don't have conditions: [...] we sleep in the trenches, in nets, like you can see, which attract the enemy's attention, which are not camouflaged. Not a tent, not a fire; we don't know whether we will eat. But imagine: someone is given a big weapon like this one, without ammunition, nothing. What if this enemy comes? What will we do? We left the headquarters with one round of ammunition. No cartridge belt, no helmet, nothing. Not a bulletproof vest. So we are asking: what is this kind of mission? If they're there, the people who invented this thing, they'd better take us out of here. We are tired. Full stop.”

Three soldiers, machine guns strapped onto their backs, speak with heavy southern accents: “Hey Jo, we're here, in Macomia. Fuck this shit. The enemy is about 18 or 20 km, we need to be ready, *shotgun, everything, you know* [in English in the original.] Let's go. So we are ready to meet the guys.”

Another young soldier, in uniform, socks, and flip-flops, cap turned backwards, announces to the camera: “How are you buddies? A guy needs to shoot at least a couple of rounds. After a couple of rounds, a guy's gonna relax.” The soldier lifts his AK-47 and lets it loose over the bush: Bam! Bam! “I've already killed the nostalgia. Bye, people!”

²⁴ <https://cddmoz.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/17-organizações-nacionais-e-internacionais-escrevem-ao-Presidente-da-República-sobre-a-violência-policial-em-Cabo-Delgado.pdf> (accessed June 16, 2024).

In July, the grassroots media Pinnacle News posted a video of Mozambican soldiers handling the bodies of fallen insurgents in a tent.²⁵ The video begins with a warning: “Don’t show your face.” The bodies get dragged about and turned. One has the face smashed to bits, in a way that suggests a beating rather than death in combat. One of the soldiers comments, somewhat mournfully, on the age of one insurgent: “This is a kid. Just a kid. I don’t know why they do this...”

These snippets expose the state of nervousness of young Mozambican soldiers, underpaid, untrained, unequipped, and unmotivated to fight a war in which they have no stakes – a war against an enemy proclaimed to be “faceless”: broadly perceived to be mandated by corrupted sectors of the State, around which a whole economy flourished, which had seen even the well-resourced Russian mercenary group Wagner defeated, and in which the insurgents always seemed to be ahead of the game.²⁶ Most of these soldiers were young men conscripted against their will, or who had turned to the army for lack of better opportunity, placed under the command of middle-class officers, who were often the children of well-connected parents.

The bubble burst in August, around the time of the fall of Mocimboa da Praia. Five videos leaked to the social media show soldiers torturing captives identified as insurgents. Four of the videos refer to the same scene, with several insurgents lying on the ground, half-naked, or with their buttocks or genitals exposed. It is unnecessary here to rehearse in detail the litany of torment. Bodies get battered, bones broken, genitals stomped on. One victim’s ear is cut off and laid before

his eyes, the knife symbolically wiped on his t-shirt. In a fifth video, soldiers go about slicing the throats and beheading the bodies of fallen insurgents, some of whom are still alive. Amnesty International published an analysis of the videos, which identifies the perpetrators as soldiers wearing uniforms of the Mozambican army (FADM) and rapid intervention police (UIR), and prompts the government to launch an independent and impartial inquiry on torture and human right violations committed in Cabo Delgado.²⁷

Three elements are important for the purpose of the present analysis. The first is the *habitus* inherent in the beatings. The gestures are not casual, or the mere result of an outburst of rage, but recur across these and other videos, internalized by the soldiers as bodily practices: the backward kick, the buttock smacking, the genital stomping. It is beyond the scope of the present intervention – and probably beyond the reach of historical recovery – to reconstruct a precise genealogy of these practices of punishment, which crystallized during colonialism and were inherited by the postcolonial state. Certainly, they are more than the product of recent events. Sadly enough, these young men reproduce the gestures with which their grandparents may have been beaten by colonial policemen.²⁸

The second is the tone of revenge inherent in the torture. The insurgents are beaten amidst jeers: “What would you be feeling sorry for? How you can see. These guys are Al-Shababs. *Alambdulilahi!* I also want to! Action, *kongwamwako* – your mother’s cunt! This one isn’t dead yet. There we are, operating. As you are seeing, the crowd is operating.

²⁵ This video, published on the Pinnacle News website, was subsequently removed. The title referred to “Daesh insurgents killed in an ambush.”

²⁶ The Mozambican public sphere was rife with conspiracy theories about former president Guebuza being the hand behind the war. For a review, see Almeida dos Santos (2020).

²⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/09/mozambique-torture-by-security-forces-in-gruesome-videos-must-be-investigated/> (accessed June 16, 2024)

²⁸ One of the few available documents about the embodiment of colonial violence is the film *Mueda Memória Massacre* by Ruy Guerra (1977), in which people from Mueda enact various forms of punishment, based on direct experience. The resemblance across time is striking.

Mocimboa da Praia here.”²⁹ And: “Action! Go for it! Is this somebody’s son? You don’t have a family. These guys think we don’t have a family. If you don’t kill, you are killed.” The soldiers cheer each other on while carrying out the deed. Several use insults from the southern Changaan language – especially *kongwamwako* (‘your mother’s vagina’) – indicating that the revenge might have a regional dimension.³⁰ At the end of the extended torture of a single man, a soldier prompts: “Aren’t we children of someone (*filho de dono*)? They try to ambush us this way? Why don’t you mistreat him? Set him alight, pour gasoline and burn. My home is faraway. *Porra! Crap!*”

The third element is virtuality. The cell-phone camera is not incidental but integral to the violence. The rage is not only directed at the suffering insurgents, but also at the potential watchers of the clips. The videos are intended as a message to the nation, especially to those who express criticism of the Mozambican army or doubt its capacities. After the torture, a soldier filming a heap of dead bodies concludes: “You say that the Al-Shababs don’t die. Cock. Your mother’s cunt. You thought you could overpower us? We’re here to show you. This is just a whiff. This is trash. Here’s more. We have more trash to show you.”

“Naked witch” or “raped mother”?

The video of the naked mother was the sixth to be leaked, only a week after Amnesty International published its indicting report. Immediately, the battle for truth caught alight. With surprising swiftness, Amnesty published a second report, geolocating the murder at the

crossroads of Awashi, a somnolent T-junction on the road between the city of Mocimboa da Praia and the town of Mueda, which allows for the entry of traffic from Pemba, the provincial capital.³¹ Amnesty also pinned down the number of bullets shot into the defenceless body to the astounding total of 36; and the date of the shooting to September 7th, surmising that the murder must have occurred in the course of a governmental “mega-operation” to retake control of Awashi.³²

The Mozambican public sphere responded with shock and mourning. One could perhaps justify the beating of insurgents, but whipping and riddling with bullets a naked woman was another matter. Mozambican intellectuals wrote eulogies to the mother of Awashi and indictments of the army. “How wide is the river of blood that bathes the lands of Cabo Delgado?” mused jurist Miguel Luis.³³ The order of lawyers called for the persecution of the perpetrators;³⁴ social justice activists, for an independent investigation;³⁵ the opposition party, for a commission of inquiry.³⁶

The government responded with a brazen denial. Minister of Interior Affairs Amade Miquidade gave a press statement in which he rejected the idea that the torture and murders

³¹<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/09/mozambique-video-showing-killing-of-naked-woman-further-proof-of-human-rights-violations-by-state-armed-forces/> (accessed June 16, 2024).

³² No further data is available on this “mega operation”; but in October, Awashi was still in insurgent hands. This information would be later systematized in Amnesty International (2021).

³³<https://www.publico.pt/2020/09/20/opiniao/noticia/barbarie-amontooise-cabo-delgado-1932147> (accessed June 16, 2024).

³⁴<https://www.dw.com/pt-002/execucao-em-cabo-delgado-ordem-dos-advogados-exige-justica/a-54935345> (accessed June 16, 2024).

³⁵<https://www.dw.com/pt-002/barbaridade-em-cabo-delgado-urgente-que-o-estado-inicie-uma-investigacao/a-54928103> (accessed June 16, 2024).

³⁶ <https://www.dw.com/pt-002/assassinatos-em-cabo-delgado-renamo-pede-comissao-de-inquerito-mas-fre-limo-recusa/a-54965291> (accessed June 16, 2024).

²⁹ The indexical reference, which was not picked up by the Amnesty International team, unequivocally locates the video in Mocimboa da Praia, as well as in time, prior to the operation of 5–11 August 2020, which led to the town’s capture by the insurgents.

³⁰ The south of the country is replete with negative stereotypes of northerners, often referred to as *xingondo* ‘warlike people’. People from the centre are also referred to as “bush goats” in relation to the war of Renamo.

had been carried out by the Mozambican armed forces. The films should be understood as propaganda on the part of terrorists who wore the uniform of the army. “We want to guarantee that the macabre acts are actions of subversion to pit the people against the very forces that protect it.”³⁷ An investigative process was under way to identify “the centre of preparation of these videos”. There was no relationship, the minister insisted, between those images and the *Forças de Defesa e Segurança* (FDS),³⁸ whose “heroism” should be “exalted”. Never would they perpetrate such a “macabre” act. The Minister of Defence released a press statement which interpreted the videos as “reductionist and dissimulated propaganda of the terrorists in Cabo Delgado, aimed at denigrating the FDS.” The minister, Jaime Neto, deemed the videos to be a “montage”.³⁹ The videos should not be “taken as certainty” given the insurgents’ tactic of camouflaging themselves with army uniforms and their savviness with fake news. “Some Mozambicans make and assemble these images and send them abroad,” the minister alleged, “and we know who they are. We shall expose them one day.”⁴⁰ The ministry’s spokesperson critiqued Amnesty’s silence over the atrocities committed by the insurgents, especially the massacre at Shitashi.

Amnesty responded by pointing out its multiple denunciations of insurgent violence. The European Union published a resolution on

the humanitarian situation in Cabo Delgado, which mentioned that the Mozambican security forces had “responded with disproportionate violence” and were “ill-equipped to deal with the surge in terrorism.”⁴¹ While several Mozambican journalists and human rights activists rejected the government’s denial, on his Facebook page, right-wing Portuguese journalist Nuno Rógerio supported the hypothesis of a “flag operation” or “rogue unit”, based on the fact that some of the murderers wore sandals and one a commercial backpack, often also used by insurgents. As we have seen, however, Mozambican soldiers had also been filming themselves in mismatched outfit and flip-flops. Most importantly, the notions of montage and deep fake invoked by the government were entirely at odds with the technical capabilities displayed by the insurgents in their rudimentary videos.

The real battle for truth, however, would not be waged through official statements, but in the murkier space of social media. Quoting an anonymous military source, one Facebook post argued that the woman was an insurgent sorceress who was caught naked while spying on the Mozambican soldiers; she would have been executed after having refused to accompany the soldiers to the enemy’s hideout. A voice note circulated, in which a woman with a southern accent, who presented herself as the relative – presumably the mother – of a soldier, further embroidered the tale. The naked woman would have been found at night, trying to bury medicinal roots near a military base, so that the troops would not wake during an incoming attack. This echoed local conceptions, in which witches dance naked at night and are able to concoct medicines that dull one’s perception or render one invisible (West 2005; Israel 2009). Such ideas were commonplace during the struggle for liberation as well. In previous circumstances, especially the attacks

³⁷<https://zitamar.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/MINT-Amade-Miquidade-15.9.2020.mp3> The link is currently broken, but I was granted access to the sound clip through the courtesy of Zitamar News.

³⁸ The denomination of FDS (Security and Defence Forces) encompasses the Mozambican army (FADM), as well as the various police units responding to the Ministry of Interior, which played a key military role at the beginning of the insurgency.

³⁹<https://www.dw.com/pt-002/governo-nega-que-militares-que-aparecem-em-v%C3%ADdeo-de-viol%C3%BAncia-sejam-do-ex%C3%A9rcito/a-54954212> (accessed June 16, 2024).

⁴⁰<https://www.dw.com/pt-002/governo-nega-que-militares-que-aparecem-em-v%C3%ADdeo-de-viol%C3%BAncia-sejam-do-ex%C3%A9rcito/a-54954212> (accessed June 16, 2024).

⁴¹https://clubofmozambique.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/TA-9-2020-0235_EN.pdf (accessed June 16, 2024).

on Muidumbe in April, the influence of magic – such as the ability to approach the enemy undetected – had been invoked as a justification for either victory or defeat. Moreover, the identification of the victim as a witch re-cast the execution not as an instance of military abuse, but as one of lynching or witch-hunting – a phenomenon that has plagued Mozambique in the past decades (Serra 2015). Based on an anonymous source within the Ministry of Defence, journalist Luis Nhachote gave credence to the “witch” version (Nhachote 2020). The “approach of a naked woman” would have been “a superstitious ritual that heralded an insurgent attack.” According to the source, the soldiers responsible for the “wrong, stupid and reprehensible” act – especially the sharing of the video – had been identified and the case was “being dealt with internally”. Some of the online commentators, however, pointed out a major inconsistency: if the “witch” was indeed caught at night near a military base, why was she executed in daytime, in disputed territory – and still naked?

On September 17th, the author of the video, who had shown his face and made the sign of victory, was identified on Facebook.⁴² While asserting that the resemblance was accidental, on the following day the family announced the young man’s demise in combat. The soldier’s profile filled with messages, both of insult and of solidarity. There is perhaps no better place to understand the polarization of the debate around the violence in Cabo Delgado than the sad virtual tombstone to that young soldier: some condemning the human right abuses, others berating the hypocrisy and un-patriotism of the bleeding hearts. “You deserved worse, you worm and pig,” one comment goes. And another: “Why don’t you go to war as well? Perhaps you will do things differently. [...] There, you would stop thinking that women in war are inoffensive, you would

know why Samora Machel said that women are the godmothers of war.” Many commentators surmised that the soldier’s death, whose timing was to say the least suspicious, had not happened in combat, but was the result of an internal reckoning, not so much for having taken part in the deed, but for the stupidity of the final selfie. The Facebook page’s photographic record offers the portrait of a young man progressively unhinged by conflict. Earlier pictures display a hip boy with a sweet, bragging smile. In later posts, when fatigues and sleeveless vests have taken the place of colourful shirts, the smile turns into a twitching grin. In the last one, the soldier, wrapped in a belt of ammunition, holds a machine gun, his eyes staring into the void.

The “witch” version of the events was challenged on another Facebook page, belonging to a woman with a pseudonym, who used as a profile picture an image of actress Teyonah Parris. In a self-interview posted on the page, she described herself as trained in law, working for a human rights NGO in Senegal, and owner of businesses in Mozambique. Her version – the pronoun is obviously hypothetical – was the fruit of unspecified “preliminary inquiries”. The victim was said to have been a 48-year-old woman, called Paulina Chitai, presumably a peasant unable to evacuate the area. She had been found by the soldiers together with her 12-year-old son, Moises Mtupa, while gathering wood, near a military position.⁴³ The son had been thrashed to death and the mother interrogated, tortured, and raped by seven soldiers.⁴⁴ After the video was leaked, the soldier responsible for the clip was supposedly executed extrajudicially as a disciplinary measure by army officials – the names and

⁴³ Both surnames, especially Mtupa, have a northern ring to them and are wholly plausible.

⁴⁴ One of the details provided in this post is incongruent: the author claims that the soldiers were from Cabo Delgado, Nampula, and Zambézia, but in the video one man can distinctly be heard saying *Xamwako* (‘your mother’s cunt’), an insult in Changana, a language from Maputo.

⁴²<https://cartamz.com/index.php/politica/item/6126-ramiro-moises-machatine-o-assassino-da-mulher-de-awasse-foi-morto> (accessed June 16, 2024).

location were mentioned – wary of the spread of videos of army violence. The post received over 500 comments, again polarized between eulogistic and scathing. Some asked what a naked woman was doing in a war area. Others pointed out that many civilians were stuck in war zones, unable to flee. The news was quoted verbatim by an influential anti-Frelimo Portuguese website,⁴⁵ which was in turn taken up by a few international newspapers,⁴⁶ especially Italian,⁴⁷ without any critical distance, thus demonstrating the permeability of the formal news outlets to the unstable rumour mill of social media. The profile of the mysterious woman who had published the news went silent a couple of weeks later.

The debate on the mother of Awashi, however, did not die out. A symbolic funeral was organized by a feminist organization.⁴⁸ Another voice note circulated on social media, in which an anonymous soldier offered some reflections on the debacle:

My brothers, this shit of Cabo Delgado is more dangerous than this shit of Renamo. When Renamo began in 2013, we knew who we would meet and for what reason we were fighting. In Beira, there were many things, many betrayals.⁴⁹ Many people fell in those bushes [...] We were whacked day to day. But we were informed ahead of time

by Renamo people: “Today we are coming. Tomorrow we attack.” So it’s different from these insurgents. The insurgents are using money... There are even colleagues who betray us, because of money, because the insurgents pay in cash and get truthful intelligence. When the insurgents say: “We will get district x,” they will get it for sure. Here, there’s betrayal for everything and nothing. For this, what those kids did wrong was to film images of that stuff. When those women pass by a post and we are there, we’ve lost so many positions to these guys, you don’t speak. For this, you can speculate, we are doing badly. When a goat passes twice, it goes down. “Where does it come from, this goat? If everything is quiet, where does it come from?” Everything is to be suspected, my brother. Even you, if you go pee, two or three times, your colleagues see you peeing, coming back – they will let you fall.

“Man of the show”

The tragedy of the mother of Awashi marked a watershed in the war for Cabo Delgado. At least three aspects can be highlighted.

First, the incident signalled the low point of the moral and military credibility of the Mozambican army. While the government waited until the fall of Palma in March 2021 to call in external help – a sad reminder that Europeans lives and interests count more than Black ones, both for the national bourgeoisie and the international community – the clarion call had gone out at Awashi. Indeed, the Rwandan army immediately engaged in a propaganda exercise, facilitated by fluency in Kiswahili, to show its solidarity with

⁴⁵https://macua.blogs.com/moambique_para_todos/2020/09/para-apagar-as-provas-o-estado-maior-general-ordenou-assassinato-do-jovem-que-deu-caranas-cameras.html (accessed June 16, 2024).

⁴⁶<https://www.worldwidemagazine.org/vol-31-no-5/from-promised-land-to-hell/> (accessed June 16, 2024).

⁴⁷ <https://www.africa-express.info/2020/09/26/mozambique-picchiata-stuprata-e-ammazzato-il-figlio-primadi-essere-freddata/> (accessed June 16, 2024).

⁴⁸<https://www.mujiresdelsur-afm.org/unidas-por-dignidade-e-paz-em-cabo-delgado-mocambique/> (accessed June 16, 2024).

⁴⁹ The speaker refers to the reprise of the civil war in central Mozambique, in a low-intensity manner, in the 2010s.

local populations.⁵⁰ Another measure taken to mitigate, as it were, the shortcomings of the national army, was the increasing institutionalization of the local militias, known as the *Força Local*; these were not necessarily more attentive to the human rights record, but at least more attuned to local idioms and needs.

Secondly, the incident encapsulated the fundamental parameters of the “new war” fought in Cabo Delgado: the dissolution of the distinction between military and civilians (even a naked, unarmed woman could be construed as an enemy); the increasing importance of stealth, dissimulation, and blur; and the intensification of “visual excesses” of violence (Bertelsen 2017). To these should be added the continued relevance of the occult as a language in which to comprehend and discuss power and warfare. Moreover, as the last voice note made clear, if, after 17 years of conflict and 20 years of democratic cohabitation, Frelimo and Renamo were somewhat joined by a shared “ontology” (Sumich and Bertelsen 2020), the Al-Shabab were alien to forgiveness or rational understanding – only trash to be disposed of.

Finally, the tragedy of Awashi demonstrated the irremediable entanglement of this new war with the new media. Let us rewind the fateful clip. At the beginning of the footage, just before the person who carries the phone starts jogging forward, a voice can distinctly be heard calling: “He! Man of the show (*homem do espetáculo*)!” The runner responds: “Don’t go far.” Someone else says: “Whip her before, to kill her after.” The soldier who leads the column says: “That smell,⁵¹ if it’s close. It will show even... It will come out well (*ficar bem*) there.” Someone makes a practical suggestion:

“Let’s kill her ahead. Let’s kill her by that mango tree.” The leading man agrees, pointing a finger: “That little mango tree, there.” All the while, the soldier who holds the phone tries to catch up: “Waaait. I am filming, here! How am I going to see you?” These meta-media interactions point unequivocally to the chilling truth: while rushing to the murder scene, like teenagers shooting a selfie, the soldiers debate which is the best spot to kill the woman so that it will “show well” on video. Just as in the clips of torture that preceded it, virtuality is integral to the violence. The mother of Awashi was killed so that her execution could be filmed.

The memory of this event is rapidly fading in the Mozambican public sphere, as well as in the international community, all too keen to sudden outrage and swift forgetfulness. In spite of all that was promised, an independent investigation into the matter was never launched.⁵² But the ripples can still be felt. In the aftermath of the debacle, the Mozambican government cracked down on independent media and introduced new legislation to regulate social networks, which could lead to the incrimination of a person for defending or promoting terrorism. Digital blackouts were enforced at critical times. The position of Awashi was fiercely disputed between the army and the insurgents until March 2021, when its retaking by the Rwandese was widely publicized. Even while the intervention of foreign actors might have abated army violence, the “habit” did not die out. Videos of police and army violence became an established genre on Mozambican social media, and even more so after the brutal repression of the public manifestations and funerals on the occasion of the death of rapper Azagaia. A video showing soldiers from the Southern African Military Force burning the bodies of insurgents led to a public outcry and

⁵⁰ One example was a video in which Rwandan soldiers pounded maize and conversed with local women, demonstrating cultural common ground. More recently, a video in a French documentary shows women of Mocimboa da Praia singing the praise of Rwanda, as they once did to the heroes of the Liberation Struggle.

⁵¹ What does the soldier mean by saying *cheiro* (‘smell’)? It is not clear.

⁵² As a point of comparison, see the exceptional work carried out by the BBC on a similar incident in Cameroon: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbnLkc6r3yc> (accessed June 16, 2024).

several governmental statements.⁵³ Images of tortured insurgents have continued to circulate, as violence in Cabo Delgado has become chronic.⁵⁴

⁵³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/01/mozambique-video-showing-soldiers-burning-corpses/> (accessed June 16, 2024).

⁵⁴ In late 2023, as the insurgency temporarily tapered out, videos of tortured insurgents confessing their

The mother of Awashi was never given a name.

weakness to a group of Mozambican soldiers circulated on the social media. Six months later, when it picked up again, more videos circulated, showing a dozen dead insurgents from the village of Mbau with visible signs of torture – smashed genitals, swollen faces, bowels ripped open. A Rwandan army tank was clearly visible in the background. The message was clear: This is what we do to those whom we catch alive.

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