

# BODIES AT WAR

## Women Ex-combatants' Embodied Memories of Mozambique's Liberation Struggle

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Mozambique's independence war from Portugal was mainly fought in the bush thickets of the northernmost parts of the country at a distance of up to 2000 km from the southern capital Maputo (at the time Lourenço Marques).<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 10-year war (1964-1974) the guerilla army FRELIMO mobilized thousands of youths from the rural villages to participate as soldiers in its political-military campaign. Also hundreds of girls became integrated into the ranks of guerilla soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Receiving the same military training as their male comrades, girls and women worked mostly in the transportation of war material, and in FRELIMO's bush hospitals and nurseries. To a varying degree they also engaged in direct combat with male soldiers. My PhD research deals with the life history memories of these women – now subsistence farmers, pensioners and grandmothers – looking back and remembering their lives as young soldier over 40 years ago.

Geographically speaking, my fieldwork was located among the Ciyao-speaking communities of the north-western province of Niassa (see map below).



<sup>1</sup> Mozambique's northern neighbour, newly independent, Tanzania served as the crucial base for launching FRELIMO's military campaign into Mozambique.

<sup>2</sup> Formally FRELIMO's Female Detachment was created in 1966 and, in February 1967, the first platoon of 25 girls started their political-military training at FRELIMO's training camp in Nachingwea, in southern Tanzania.

I chose the area as women from these villages were among the first women to receive political-military training at FRELIMO's training camp in Tanzania starting from 1966 (together with women from the neighboring province of Cabo Delgado).<sup>3</sup> It is my estimation that between 200 and 250 girls and women (approximately 10 % of the total guerilla force) were integrated as soldiers into the Niassa front of the liberation struggle.<sup>4</sup> At independence, while higher ranking officers were transferred to the capital city, and other urban areas, a majority of the foot soldiers returned to their rural origins. When I was conducting interviews for my MA thesis in the capital Maputo – which hosts the largest ex-combatant community in Mozambique – I came across only few ex-combatants from Niassa; moreover, ex-combatants from Niassa (both Ciyao and Nyanya speaking) were largely invisible in the public commemoration of the liberation struggle taking place in the capital city. This motivated my initial interest in conducting research in Niassa, which in Mozambican national imagery is often depicted as a peripheral hinterland: void of people, and abundant in empty space. Furthermore, I became interested in exploring how national space and belonging are conceptualized and related to the lived experiences of the 'local' landscapes, and also, how the gendered meanings of these landscapes of belonging are negotiated.<sup>5</sup> My assumption was that in more politically marginal spaces, at a distance from the urban elite and the state apparatus, the nation is more varyingly conceptualized, even by veterans of the liberation struggle.

Building on my previously conducted fieldwork (10/2012–8/2013) – during which I negotiated access to my research sites and conducted life history interviews with over 30 women ex-combatants, group interviews with male ex-combatants, and interviews with community elders about the older historical memories of the region – in my final fieldwork (5/2014–7/2014) I wanted to deepen my understanding of the sensory memories of the war, that is, how the war continues to be remembered in and through the ex-combatant body. I also wanted to explore more in-depth the relation between body/landscape and language, especially the language of the nationalist discourse.

War, Kevin McSorely insists, is 'politics incarnate, politics written on and experienced through the thinking, feeling bodies of men and women'.<sup>6</sup> These days, forty years after independence, many women war veterans – now grandmothers, subsistence farmers and pensioners – express a strong 'feeling' of disappointment with their experiences of 'independence'. As some insist, 'the war suffering continues even today'. One female ex-combatant, Helena, for instance, speaks of how the sounds and smells of war still enter her dreams. Up to four times a month she startles herself awake,

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<sup>3</sup> In comparison to Cabo Delgado, Niassa is considered an isolated province, and relatively little research exists on the history of the area including the history of the liberation struggle. Also, little research exists on the ethnology and histories of the Ciyao speaking peoples. More studies have been conducted in the former British colony Malawi (cf. Stannus 1922; Mitchell 1956; Alpers 1969; Abdallah 1983) than in Mozambique (cf. Santos 1964; Amaral 1990; Medeiros 1997), though the mountainous area between the Lugenda and Lucheringo rivers east of Lake Niassa is popularly described as the homeland of the Yao people.

<sup>4</sup> FRELIMO opened the Cabo Delgado and Niassa war fronts in 1964, while the Tete front was opened in 1968. War fronts were later opened also in the central provinces of Manica and Sofala and Zambezia.

<sup>5</sup> I emphasize a conception of landscape that is experienced through embodiment. See e.g. T. Ingold, 'The Temporality of Landscape', *World Archaeology* 25, 2 (October 1993), pp. 152–174; B. Bender 'Introduction: Landscape – Meaning and Action,' in B. Bender (ed.), *Landscapes: Politics and Perspectives* (Oxford, Berg, 1993), pp. 1–17; K. R. Olwig, 'Performing on the Landscape Versus Doing Landscape: Perambulatory Practice, Sight and the Sense of Belonging', in T. Ingold and J. L. Vergunst (eds.), *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot* (Burlington, Ashgate Publishing, 2008), pp. 81–91. Moreover, as Bronwyn Davies argues, bodies take up 'their material existence within landscapes, and as landscape'.

<sup>6</sup> K. McSorely 'War and the Body,' in K. McSorely (ed.), *War and the Body: Militarisation, Practice and Experience* (Oxon, Routledge, 2012), p. 1.

absolutely convinced that she has heard real gunshots.<sup>7</sup> Her dreams, she analyses are provoked by the ‘pain of war’ but also the ‘talk’ (politics) that existed in the war but no longer exists. Furthermore, talking about why she doesn’t seem to be able to forget about the war, she explains that ‘living in the thorn bushes, how can a person forget that one used to live in the thorn bushes (referring to her years spent in the bush thickets of northern Niassa fighting for ‘national liberation’)’. Though I am only in the beginning of the analysis of my newly gathered data, I would suggest that any ‘making sense’ of these women’s experiences as war veterans in today’s socio-political context requires a closer study of these sensory experiences and memories. Moreover, I propose that the key political notions of the wartime nationalist discourse, such as, ‘suffering’, ‘politics’ and ‘unity’ are intimately linked to sensory ways of knowing and thus tied to the body subjects of the individual war veterans. So far the body has not received deserving analytical attention in the research on war memories. By taking an analytical and conceptual focus on body/landscape, this research proposes to bring new insight into the gendered making of nation and nationalism.

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<sup>7</sup> Author interview: Helena Caisse, 10 June 2014, Malulu, Niassa.