

# The Persistence of Military Identities among Ex-Combatants in South Africa

Godfrey Maringira,  
with Jasmina Brankovic



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### Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation

4th Floor, Braamfontein Centre  
23 Jorissen Street, Braamfontein, PO Box 30778  
Johannesburg 2017, South Africa  
Tel: +27 (0) 11 403 5650  
Fax: +27 (0) 11 339 6785

### Cape Town Office

501 Premier Centre, 451 Main Road, Observatory  
Cape Town 7925, South Africa  
Tel: +27 (0) 21 447 3661  
Fax: +27 (0) 21 447 5356

[www.csvr.org.za](http://www.csvr.org.za)

### Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape

Modderdam Road  
Bellville 7535, South Africa  
Tel: +27 (0) 21 959 3162  
Fax: +27 (0) 21 959 1282

[humanities.uwc.ac.za](http://humanities.uwc.ac.za)

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I'm here; sometimes I sleep with no food. I become angry and that anger stays. I control it, even suppress it, understanding it, you know, that this is what is happening, this is what I need to do, but sometimes one loses hope and then and it's easy for me to just use my skills, you know, take a spade and dig a hole and take something out and go and rob the bank with me gang and, you know, share the money, you know, build my mother's house.

– Comrade Bonginkosi, Gugulethu township

## Introduction

The excerpt above represents the stories of a number of ex-combatants interviewed for this research, who are either unemployed or earning little money to support their families. They express a combination of hunger and anger. For them, the gun remains an alternative avenue for making a life in a highly unequal and violent society, even when it is an option that is not pursued. The imagining of the gun is testimony to how ex-combatants' minds have remained militarised despite South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994. The ex-combatants see the gun as a way to redress the inequalities that have remained pervasive in many townships, as well as to meet their own families' and communities' expectations as providers and defenders.

This report focuses on the ways in which ex-combatants have remained militarised at both an individual and a collective level in post-apartheid South Africa. The ex-combatants I interviewed cling to their military skills and ability to do violence, which they view as a means of maintaining their social status, making a living and protecting their families and communities, particularly in response to their perceived marginalisation by the state. This view is often reinforced by communities and families, which expect ex-combatants to use their military skills and to respond to violence with violence. At the same time, ex-combatants use the social networks emerging from

their military identities to mobilise around community issues. They also use their military skills in peacebuilding activities, such as recruiting youth involved in crime into development projects. I argue that ex-combatants' military identities and skills can be both beneficial and detrimental to their families, communities and the state. For this reason, as long as disarmament, demobilisation, reinsertion and reintegration (DDRR) programmes remain short-term processes aimed chiefly at disarming ex-combatants, as is the dominant model, without addressing the ongoing needs of ex-combatants living in highly unequal and violent societies, the demilitarisation of ex-combatants' minds and everyday lives will be an unattainable goal. This research has been motivated in part by my own experiences as a Zimbabwean former soldier living in South Africa, as will be discussed below.

Informed by past phases of the Violence and Transition project that focused on different ex-combatant groups in South Africa (see Gear 2002; Harris 2006), the third and current phase of the Violence and Transition project explores the experiences of a group of ex-combatants from the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA), the military arm of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), living in the Cape Town townships of Gugulethu, KTC, Nyanga and Khayelitsha. Using a life history approach, I conducted life history interviews with 11 APLA ex-combatants and held a focus group discussion with 17 APLA ex-combatants. Both the interviews and the group discussion were facilitated by an APLA ex-combatant, Comrade Bonginkosi, whom the interviewees regarded as their "coordinator".<sup>1</sup> Through the resulting narratives, the report examines the position of the APLA ex-combatants over time in relation to their understanding of violence and their relationships with their communities. Aside from the fact that they are a less researched group than the military wing of the African National Congress (ANC), Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the APLA ex-combatants I interviewed are of particular interest as several have participated in civil society peacebuilding initiatives. One of the findings from this research is that, notwithstanding their self-identification as 'peace ambassadors', military or 'struggle' identities remain a powerful force in the APLA ex-combatants' everyday lives.

I also widened the lens of previous research conducted with ex-combatants in South Africa by engaging with the stories of five exiled Zimbabwean former soldiers living in Johannesburg. I did this in order to understand whether such migrant groups are involved in the ongoing violence in

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<sup>1</sup> The names of all of the interviewees have been changed at their request.



South Africa. The Zimbabwean ex-soldiers I interviewed, in addition to three former soldiers with whom I had a focus group discussion, have remained a 'disciplined', largely non-violent group mainly because of their position as people seeking refuge. These interviewees do not want to risk their lives by being involved in criminal activities. The idea of integrating Zimbabwean ex-soldiers' stories in this research stems from the fact that all of CSVR's work on ex-combatants has focused exclusively on South African ex-combatants, despite the fact that many thousands of former soldiers from other countries across the continent and further afield are resident in South Africa. Considering that these ex-soldiers have fled violence and war, an effort should be made to understand the ways in which such groups have remained socially connected and how their military mindset and skills are being 'deployed' and reproduced in South Africa. Space does not allow me to engage in depth with this topic, but the interviews show that there are commonalities between the APLA and Zimbabwean ex-combatants, particularly in that their military identities have remained fixed. The Zimbabwean ex-soldiers view themselves as different from civilian migrants, just as APLA ex-combatants see themselves as different from other South Africans. This suggests that in certain circumstances, these ex-combatants may remain available for mobilisation.

This report begins by outlining the literature on military identities and the militarisation of post-apartheid South African communities before turning to a brief discussion on the dominant thinking regarding demilitarisation. It then presents three narratives – two offered by APLA ex-combatants and one by a Zimbabwean ex-soldier – as well as a description of my own relationship with and approach to the interviewees. It concludes with some reflections on the need for a more holistic and ongoing approach to demilitarisation, as evidenced in the three narratives.

## Conceptualising Military Identities

Following the end of the armed struggle in South Africa, former combatants generally expected that their lives would be transformed for the better and that they would be successfully integrated into their communities. However, as a result of an ineffective DDDR process (Cock 2001:43), the majority of ex-combatants were not successfully integrated (Gear 2002; Harris 2006; Mashike 2007; Van der Merwe and Lamb 2009). Supporting previous research findings, the ex-combatants I interviewed noted that they are a marginalised group and that they lack skills valued on the global market

(Mashike 2007; Cilliers 1995; Cock 2001). Narratives of marginalisation remain pervasive in ex-combatants' lives in the townships, with no immediate hope that their situation will change.

Early research on ex-combatants in South Africa arose from the scapegoating and social anxiety associated with them in the late 1990s (Gear 2002; Cock 2005; Cock 1993; Mashike 2007). This research was driven by a fear that ex-combatants were a danger to South Africa's society and a threat to peace (Marks 1995; Marks and McKenzie 1995). Much of the post-2000 work on ex-combatants has challenged this idea, with researchers demonstrating that although ex-combatants have held on to their military identities, the media has tended to sensationalise ex-combatants' involvement in crime after demobilisation (Gear 2002; Gear 2005; Harris 2006; Mashike 2007). At the same time, anxiety about possible involvement in violence is not entirely unfounded. As Stott (2002) and Dzinesa (2008) note, ex-combatants staged sit-ins at the ANC's offices in Johannesburg and Durban and threatened to become violent if their demands were not met. Also, the MK Military Veterans Association has threatened violence on more than one occasion in relation to defending President Jacob Zuma.

The post-2000 literature on South African ex-combatants indicates that ex-combatants' identities are in transition (Gear 2002). In 2001, Xaba wrote about 'struggle masculinity' and 'post-struggle masculinity', and the inability of many ex-combatants to adopt the latter. More than a decade later and nearly 20 years after the advent of democracy, the situation has not changed, and many ex-combatants continue to carry military identities. The continuities of struggle identities post-apartheid have to be understood as part of a particular historical context and through the ways in which they have been reproduced and maintained over time. The way ex-combatants understand their identities is closely associated with being trained or mobilised for combat duties during and after the liberation struggle. In many circumstances, ex-combatants voice clear allegiances, networks and 'comradeship', with ex-combatants working together to address any injury to one of their comrades (Harris 2006:40). The armed group to which they belonged and their experiences of violence during the struggle determine ex-combatants' current identities.

While military identities involve wider issues that are connected to the idea of being a soldier, military training is the ultimate point of departure for understanding the ways in which such identities have been inculcated and maintained. Transforming a civilian into a soldier involves indoctrinating a new identity that is masculine in nature – that of a 'warrior-hero' (Woodward 2000). Even female combatants' identities are 'masculinised' (Sasson-Levy 2002). Military identities

involve being ready to take risks and to enter new and dangerous terrains (Woodward 2000). They also incorporate the learning of military tactics and discipline (Foucault 1977). Such identities celebrate the difference between the soldier and civilian. Through military training, a kind of subjectivity that views combatants as people with a superior right to citizenship and belonging is fostered. Military identities built during training are strengthened by involvement in war. It is through these processes that soldiers are made out of civilians.

The military experiences of South African ex-combatants differ, as some were in exile during the struggle, some remained in the townships to fight and some were later integrated into the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) (Gear 2002). Lodge (1995) and Motumi (1995) show that many guerrillas in exile received advanced military training. South African ex-combatants are difficult to define as they involve a wide array of people, including those who participated in street protests in the townships and those in Self-Defence Units (SDUs), formed mainly at the behest of the ANC to render the townships ungovernable and to protect their communities against security forces. Some argue that such combatants had more actual experience of fighting against apartheid security forces than many in the guerrilla armies. Other South African ex-combatants received little or no military training. As Lodge (1995:110) notes, members of the Pan Africanist Student Organization (PASO) went for one-week weapons handling courses administered by APLA and occasionally undertook operations under APLA's direction. Similarly, Motumi (1995:96) describes the absence of military training and coordination among SDUs. Despite the differences in their training and experiences, ex-combatants have in common their military identities.

Military identities cohere around the possession and use of military skills (Gear 2002; Harris 2006). The concept of military identity enables us to understand the different ways in which ex-combatants have continued to identify themselves and are identified over time. Identities forged through resistance have been maintained in the present as communities and individual ex-combatants reproduce and shape them. The main components of military identity post-apartheid include the capacity to use arms without being caught, social networking among ex-combatants, maintaining particular hierarchies within ex-combatant structures, loyalty to the group, willingness to use violence to deal with violence, a military mindset of hyper-vigilance, wariness and suspicion and an ideological commitment to a political cause (Gear 2002). Ex-combatants' social networks emanate from their military identities, as experiences and social bonds from wartime continue to be reconfigured and appropriated for ex-combatants' social, economic and political benefit.

When I refer to military identities, I am discussing more than the naming of combatants as ex-combatants when they leave their formal duties. I refer to what they continue to bear in their minds and the tactics they use in navigating their environment. Vigh defines this social navigation as “how people act in difficult or uncertain circumstances and ... how they disentangle themselves from confining structures, plot their escape and move towards better positions” (2009:419). While there is nothing unique in social navigation, what is interesting is how ex-combatants can make use of what they have learnt in the past to eke out a living in post-combat life. Some regard the gun as an avenue to acquiring money to feed their families. Their everyday lives are a struggle to secure themselves the next meal, find the next job and survive in the present, as well as an unceasing attempt to figure out a way of gaining viable life chances, social worth and recognition. As is clear in the narratives presented below, their post-combat lives have remained militarised as they continuously draw on their combat experiences to understand the present.

This is supported by Cock (2001:43), who argues that the conclusion of the armed struggle was not accompanied by effective disarmament and demobilisation. Motumi and Mackenzie (1998) indicate that the reintegration of ex-combatants in South Africa was ill-planned and that most ex-combatants did not benefit from the process. The repetition of this failure throughout post-colonial Africa has provided impetus for the imagining of guns. While previous scholarly criticism of the DDRR process in South Africa has pointed to its failure effectively to collect and manage weapons from various clandestine arms caches, leaving a great many small arms in private and public hands (Cock 2001; Dzinesa 2008), what has not been emphasised enough is the continuing militarisation of ex-combatants’ minds. The argument here is that taking away the gun from the ex-combatant is not enough – it is just a first step towards demilitarisation. The mind of the ex-combatant remains tuned to the gun in national and local contexts, themselves militarised, in which ex-combatants feel neglected and marginalised.

## Militarisation

Like the concept of military identity, militarisation is broad as it involves the mobilisation of resources for war and the ideological justification that violence is necessary to solve social, economic and political problems (Gear 2002; Gear 2005; Cock 2005). Militarisation tends to dominate the whole of South African society, as an accepted response to violence is violence (Cock

2005). The ways in which ex-combatants have remained entrenched in military life is demonstrated by the ways in which they respond to particular situations. Some of the APLA ex-combatants I interviewed are involved in vigilante groups and others provide security for tourists visiting Gugulethu – both situations in which they use their military tactics to deal with crime. The interviewees state that because they know Gugulethu and its crime and violence better than any other person, they are best placed to deal with criminals in the township. Community members often support this perception by seeing ex-combatants as people with military skills who can protect them. Nearly 20 years after the transition, the community still views and expects ex-combatants to be the defenders of the community. In some cases, ex-combatants are either called on to intervene when there is violence or are expected to use violence against violence. This is an example of the ‘militarisation of communities’, with communities holding particular expectations concerning the roles ex-combatants should play.

In the South African context, both civilians and ex-combatants were militarised by, respectively, witnessing and participating in armed conflict. Much of the liberation struggle was waged in urban areas, and it affected many of the people currently living in urban townships. When the concept of militarisation is extended to the community of which ex-combatants are a part, including the new generations growing up in those communities, there are particular challenges in relation to demilitarisation. Examining how this broad social militarisation affects ex-combatants enables us to focus on the ways in which they experienced war, the meanings they give to particular situations in their current lives and how they respond in their everyday lives in the townships.

While any group of friends can come together and share their ordeals and practices, the ways in which ex-combatants form social groups is historically embedded in their struggle experiences and their sense of being marginalised by the state today. The argument here is that the social formations forged during the war continue in the present as a way of responding to their situation and current position in their communities. It can be argued that ex-combatants remain easy to mobilise when they can still network, gather, spend time as a group and share their experiences. For example, their strong networks have enabled them to influence each other to restructure their veterans’ associations. When I was with APLA ex-combatants in Gugulethu, they were usually talking about their Military Veterans’ Association (APLA-MVA) and ways in which they could successfully make a living as ex-combatants. Such networks also make ex-combatants visible within their communities, as they are seen gathering and accompanying each other in township

streets. Among APLA ex-combatants, the APLA-MVA has remained in place with the possibility of being restructured when the need arises.

For exiled Zimbabwean soldiers living in Johannesburg, the Affected Military of Zimbabwe Association (AMMOZA) is a strong military association driven by the need to lobby the Zimbabwean government regarding their plight. Those who deserted from the army desire to return home, hence they are lobbying for amnesty. Members of this group, and the chairman in particular, state that since military men are different from civilians, their problems should be prioritised. Making such a distinction might be one way of continuing the militarisation of former soldiers and ex-combatants. This idea also feeds into the ways in which former soldiers or ex-combatants may help to shape and reconfigure this militarisation in their everyday lives.

Another characteristic of militarisation is elitism (De Waal 2003:75). Borrowing from De Waal (2003) and judging from the interviews I did, this involves ex-combatants seeing themselves as a separate group of citizens who deserve to be recognized for being willing to sacrifice their lives in conflict. According to De Waal, such a group believes that it embodies certain values and morals largely lacking in the wider community, such as discipline, courage and loyalty. The idea is that ex-combatants view themselves as custodians of values that none other than they can protect and mobilise for the benefit of their communities. The involvement of ex-combatants in community development projects and community policy forums can also be explored within this framework.

The militarisation of ex-combatants and Zimbabwean former soldiers in South Africa is also evident in the ways in which they have maintained secrecy and controlled the information they have and what they decide to share. Information about the ex-combatant and former soldier groups is tightly controlled. This historical tendency resembles military discipline in the sense that soldiers are trained to maintain secrecy about the events of war. In many cases, soldiers are vetted to see if they are trustworthy and able to keep secrets. This was evident among APLA ex-combatants, as they maintained my position as a researcher and theirs as APLA ex-combatants. We could only meet at the facilitator's house, do all the interviews there and part ways afterwards. They would not allow me to visit them at their respective houses and all interviews were arranged through their "coordinator", the facilitator for the study.

The APLA ex-combatants' and Zimbabwean former soldiers' militarised past has remained their story to tell. Little other than past war experiences frame their lives and nothing pleases them more than telling war stories. Their past story is a story about the gun, which they often see as a

way to free themselves, including from poverty. In situations where ex-combatants continue to feel threatened, either by the politics of today or by poverty in general, the gun becomes an option for responding to the situation they are facing. Vencovsky notes that, “for many, living by the gun presents an opportunity to earn a livelihood and, in peacetime ex-combatants have to be offered an alternative mode of making a living” (2006:264). In this context, the dominant approach to DDRR, aimed mainly at disarming ex-combatants, needs to be rethought.

## Rethinking Demobilisation, Disarmament, Reinsertion and Reintegration

In many post-conflict African countries, there has been a narrow understanding of DDRR and its application. In South Africa in particular, following the 1994 political negotiations, many liberation fighters in exile were asked to return to South Africa as unarmed civilians. Returnees were either effectively integrated into the SANDF or demobilised and reintegrated into their communities. For those who were demobilised, the idea of ex-combatants being integrated into civilian life is nothing but a mirage. The literature on ex-combatants also notes that the DDRR programme in South Africa failed to integrate ex-combatants economically into their communities (Van der Merwe and Lamb 2009). Immediate reintegration upon return from exile was not followed by a long-term process of ensuring reintegration had worked (Mashike 2000). Despite the reinsertion packages given to ex-combatants at the end of the liberation war, few benefited from such programmes (Mashike 2000). The failure effectively to implement DDRR left many ex-combatants living in difficult economic and political conditions with limited choices for creating a better life. With few employment opportunities, many live in abject poverty.

A number of APLA ex-combatants I interviewed note that they do not have jobs and that many employers view them as an unemployable group because of their combatant pasts. However, many interviewees talked about having a sense of guilt and remorse for the violence they committed in the run-up to the first democratic elections in South Africa, including killing and being involved in cash heists, and noted that they have started on a peaceful journey that has led some to become born-again Christians. Nonetheless, they retain ‘struggle’ military identities. I refer to this as the difficulties in demilitarising the mind and argue that DDRR should go beyond the standard process of taking away arms and reintegrating combatants into civilian life. Instead of being given a

short life span, DDDR should be a long process guided by normalising the lives of ex-combatants in their communities. While the DDDR process is usually determined by the government resources available for assisting ex-combatants, the suggestion here is that ex-combatants need to be continually engaged with and their stories listened to in order to minimise the risk of them returning to guns in a peaceful environment.

These arguments will be picked up below, after I have presented three narratives, two from APLA ex-combatants and one from an exiled Zimbabwean former soldier living in South Africa, as well as described my relationship with the interviewees.

## Relationship with Interviewees

I used a life history approach to delve into how the APLA ex-combatants and the Zimbabwean former soldiers have understood violence over time and how their perceptions have changed. Most of the APLA ex-combatants state that they were in exile during apartheid, in Libya, Angola, Mozambique, Botswana, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Yugoslavia, and usually in more than one country. Some travelled out of South Africa in order to receive military training and then returned to South Africa between 1992 and 1994 during the political negotiations and the first democratic elections. Some remained in South Africa and became underground freedom fighters in the townships. The Zimbabwean ex-soldiers, meanwhile, did not fight in the Zimbabwean liberation war. They joined the army in 1986, six years after independence. Nonetheless, they were deployed in Mozambique during its civil war (1986–1992), in an Angola peacekeeping operation (1996) and in the Democratic Republic of Congo war (1998).

When I first approached the interviewees, I informed them of my own position as an ex-combatant and my past as a member of the Zimbabwean army. My experiences have informed this research and helped me to establish trust with the interviewees, some of whom I know from my combatant days. All of the interviewees were made aware of the research objectives and agreed to participate, although they requested that pseudonyms be used in the presentation of findings, particularly the Zimbabwean interviewees, who may be hunted by the military police and military intelligence in Zimbabwe. The interviewees in Cape Town were all APLA ex-combatants, with the exception of one MK member. Most were from Cape Town. These interviewees were accessed through an APLA ex-combatant, Comrade Bonginkosi, who previously worked with the Centre for



the Study of Violence and Reconciliation and was a key respondent in Gugulethu. Although I initially asked Comrade Bonginkosi only to organise a meeting with the ex-combatants to brief them about the research, he continued to be the main facilitator of the interviews, identifying and contacting ex-combatants, explaining the purpose of the project, providing a venue for interviews and interpreting where necessary. The majority of the interviews took place at his home in Gugulethu, and he was present at most interviews.

Comrade Bonginkosi also became a gatekeeper. In three cases, I overheard interviewees arguing about the research and whether it was intended to spy on their lives or for ex-combatants to benefit from it. The main question almost all the ex-combatants asked was in what ways they would benefit from research that seeks to understand them and their lives. In one instance, an ex-combatant asked me whether I was sent by George W. Bush, the former U.S. president. This fear of speaking to outsiders suggests a level of anxiety, even paranoia, among the ex-combatants. Perhaps because of this fear, the interviewees preferred that I communicate only with Comrade Bonginkosi, who would relay my messages to them. When I asked if I could call them directly, they replied, “Just speak to Comrade Bonginkosi”. Although I wished to avoid this form of communication, where the gatekeeper becomes both the facilitator and the interpreter, my efforts proved fruitless, as the ex-combatants clung to the facilitator. The life history interviews were conducted in two phases from September to December 2011 and from February to April 2012. In order to build relationships with the ex-combatants and to be involved in their everyday lives, I also accompanied them as a group when they visited the Trauma Centre, where they went for counselling. I sought to understand the ways in which ex-combatants engaged with such institutions in relation to what they had experienced in the past.

With regard to the five Zimbabwean ex-soldiers I interviewed in Johannesburg, I have a long-time relationship with them that began in 2000. I personally trained and worked with some of them both in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Zimbabwe, and now we have met in South Africa. In this case, I was the gatekeeper, and the ex-soldiers welcomed me as one of them because of the past experiences we share. I am deeply immersed in the lives of Zimbabwean ex-soldiers in South Africa. This group is not willing to talk about their past to everyone, as they are on the run from military forces in Zimbabwe and feel vulnerable given the close relationship between the ruling parties in South Africa and Zimbabwe. In many cases, they identify themselves as former teachers, nurses and so forth in order to blend in with other migrants from Zimbabwe.

After completing the life history interviews, I closely read the transcripts alongside the existing literature on ex-combatants. This helped me to draw out themes in the interviews. The narratives are exceptionally rich and demonstrate the different ways in which violence is defined in the interviewees' lives. It is noteworthy that the interviewees rarely use the term 'violence' to describe their actions. The danger in employing the term 'violence' is that violence is experienced differently over time and that the term pathologises actions that the interviewees might view as legitimate. Parkin (1986:205) suggests that 'violence' is very much a word used by those who witness it rather than those who perform it. In this regard, 'violence' is a term more prevalent among victims, witnesses and researchers than among perpetrators. Riches (1986) reminds us to use the language of people being studied, thus I emphasise the interviewees' way of describing themselves. The ways in which ex-combatants tell and give meaning to their life stories is important as it brings out how their past has given particular meanings to their present. The issue of militarisation and the difficulties of demilitarising their minds emerge as cross-cutting themes in the three narratives.

All three of the former combatants whose narratives are presented below underwent military training and were deployed in war situations in the past. The narratives enable us to understand the ways in which their everyday lives remain militarised in the present. Their experiences cannot fully represent all guerrillas' and exiled soldiers' experiences, as experiences differ and the ways in which stories are narrated are specific to individual storytellers. Nonetheless, what is interesting is how the three narratives connect in terms of combat experiences and their aftermath.

## Comrade Bonginkosi's Narrative

I include Comrade Bonginkosi's story in this report because it speaks to the ways in which ex-combatants understand violence as negative "moments of unconsciousness" while also viewing it as a necessary means to "repossess" what is seen as "their" property in an unequal society. Comrade Bonginkosi also describes the way his family and relatives and other people he knows expect him to use his military skills to eke out a living through illegal means like robbing banks and to protect his family from violence.

Comrade Bonginkosi was born in Gugulethu in 1971. He went to school in the same area and grew up there with both of his parents and two sisters. From the age of four, he started witnessing the uprisings against apartheid but he did not understand the reasons behind the protests in Gugulethu. Like his “cousin-brother”, he decided to bunk school: “He used to bunk school that guy, you know, and then he infected me with that disease of bunking school”. Comrade Bonginkosi refused to go to school and decided to sleep in the streets with street kids. Even though his mother took him from the streets, he continued bunking school. He began to steal fuel that his father had stolen from the company for which he worked and later returned to living in the streets.

In the early 1980s, Comrade Bonginkosi participated in the boycotts occurring in Gugulethu. Gugulethu became his world;

There was a serious, you know, ah, uprising in Gugulethu ... It was the time that, you know, the whole world was my community, you know. I thought life was based on my community only, you know, so I participated, you know, unconsciously in those school boycotts, consumer boycotts.

Comrade Bonginkosi presents his involvement in the struggle as “unconscious”. It is unclear whether his distinction between conscious and unconscious involvement is based on the degree of his participation or his age when he became involved in the struggle. Nonetheless, he articulates a sense of belonging to a community, describing Gugulethu as “my community”, which entails being conscious of where one belongs. Does this not mean that he was also conscious of the unfolding events in “his” community?

In 1985, Comrade Bonginkosi was approached by Christopher Piet, whom he terms a ‘revolutionary’, and asked to keep a bag in his mother’s house.<sup>2</sup> Comrade Bonginkosi kept it for a long time until his mother discovered that it was full of weapons. His mother asked their neighbour, an old man, whom Comrade Bonginkosi also describes as a ‘revolutionary’, a PAC member, to keep the bag. The narrative suggests that anyone who was respected in the community and responsible to the struggle was seen as a ‘revolutionary’. This resonates with the stories of other ex-combatants, who refer to themselves as ‘revolutionaries’ in the interviews.

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Piet was one of a group of young men known as the Gugulethu 7. They were part of a group of young militants infiltrated by security police, who helped to train and arm them. Seven of the young men were ambushed and killed in an entrapment operation on March 3, 1986, which Comrade Bonginkosi witnessed and describes below.

Comrade Bonginkosi's narrative reveals the ways in which children in townships were militarised during apartheid:

And then that old man, you know, my neighbour, he was a 'revolutionary' himself, you know, he was in the Pan African comrades but that time all the political parties were banned, you know, so he started to tell me about the revolution himself, my neighbour and, you know, he brought his son along because his son was, ah, three years older than me but he was my peer and then he told us about, you know, the struggle against apartheid, you know, and he taught us about the revolution and stuff and then that same man guy, he, he came back to us, you know, he introduced us to, ah, guys who were operating in by then and then, and that was 1985, 1986, and then we, we were involved in his, in his activities. I would carry, you know, his bags, you know, walk with them, this group of old guys, you know but I would walk in front then they would follow me, you know, like me and my neighbour, you know, carried their weapons for them.

In 1986, Comrade Bonginkosi was carrying weapons in KTC, an informal settlement, when he witnessed a fight between 'revolutionaries' and white officers. He describes the encounter as a "turning point" in his life:

On that day Christopher Piet had a clash with this group of guys and then that's when they ran to us and grabbed the bags and they started engaging with this man. That was a turning point in my life, you know, because after that I think I changed because of what I saw, you know, on those bags, you know ... Something, you know, something told me that that's what I need to be doing, you know, like, ah, you know, I really, like, I felt, you know, like that, you know, because I wanted to do something even then, you know, and then everybody ran but the two of us, me and my neighbour, we didn't run, you know, we were standing there, we took cover, you know, like, we only ran to a nearest house and then we observed what was going on, what was happening and then the man from that house chased us away, he said we must run and then I think that was a turning point in my life and then I was very excited when we came back, you know, like, ah, we were very excited, talking about these things, the guys here, you know, my friends in the street.

The way Comrade Bonginkosi describes the "carrying of bags of weapons" and "walk[ing] with them" gives an image of a war situation, in which he and the others are on patrol. One can visualise this carrying of bags and walking as the three principles of conventional warfare: advance, attack and withdraw. Comrade Bonginkosi's response to the fight he witnessed seems to be a response in which he was instructed by the 'revolutionaries'. It is a military tactic to engage with the enemy: "You don't run away, otherwise you will be wiped out". Instead of running, they "took cover". Comrade Bonginkosi and the other older 'revolutionaries' performed as trained soldiers would, which allowed them to survive the fight. Comrade Bonginkosi's experience is framed as a turning point. He shared his experience of that day with other children and this motivated him to

become one of the ‘revolutionaries’. Another turning point can be identified in the way they “gained confidence” in what they might have been taught by the ‘revolutionaries’. Comrade Bonginkosi’s experience reveals that children can be used as frontrunners in times of conflict because in many cases they are seen as passive actors. This notion of children’s passivity in conflict and viewing them as victims is challenged by Comrade Bonginkosi’s experience and the role he played working with ‘revolutionaries’. He became deeply involved in what was happening in Gugulethu and KTC:

We went back to school but on that period, you know, like, because I knew what was going on in KTC and then here, you know, this guy, Christopher Piet who happened to be commander of that unit that was in KTC, you know, and then I thought I knew what was, you know, going on in the area, you know, because he told us that we, that we, now we are the, you know, the watchers of the community, you know. Every time he heard a gunshot we must go out and make sure that the, we see who’s firing and we know who, you know, so he would brief us, you know, about what was happening around.

The children going from followers to “watchers of the community” can be understood here as some sort of promotion and, more important, recognition of the role they played. Comrade Bonginkosi was entrusted to follow gunshots and report to the ‘revolutionaries’.

Comrade Bonginkosi then vividly recalls following the sound of gunfire and witnessing the Gugulethu 7 incident, in which Christopher Piet was killed:

Actually in those years in Gugulethu to hear a gunshot in Gugulethu it was, you know normal ... but on this particular day, you know these gunshots they didn’t stop ... I followed them, I was worried, I was looking around for Christopher Piet, you know, guy. We used to call, to refer to him as Commander ... when we came to NY1, you know, there was, you know these red tapes ... We went under the red tape and we wanted to see what was happening in NY1 and then I realized when I came there ... He [a white officer] assisted by a black constable grabbed Christopher Piet from the bush and they went, they put him under the tree there in NY1. When we were, like, still observing what was going on, I saw one of these guys, you know, he [a black constable] fired a shot into the head of Christopher Piet, you know, like, it was at close range ... Another black guy, you know, killing another black guy, you know, like everyone and I was angry ... I wanted to go there ... I realized that everybody ran, I’m the only one who’s still there and then I ran, they fired at me and then luckily I was not hurt and then I ran.

The excerpt reads as if Comrade Bonginkosi is seeing what happened in the present. He says that witnessing the killing of his “commander” made him angry. He talks about “another black guy ... killing another black guy”, which he did not expect to see. He notes, “I wanted to go there”, which describes ‘military cohesiveness’ in war and providing cover fire for fellow combatants. It seems that Comrade Bonginkosi wanted to rescue Christopher Piet but he could not do so because others

ran and he was left on his own. This idea of not running is repeated in all his descriptions of encountering gunfire. His survival can be partly explained by his ability to utilise what he might have been taught by the 'revolutionaries'.

The killing of Christopher Piet motivated Comrade Bonginkosi to become more interested in the events unfolding in Gugulethu:

I didn't go to school, you know, it was chaotic here in this area, you know, because these guys just started to raid house by house, you know, they raided, they wanted someone and then we thought that, you know because, there was a bus that always, ah, drove past NY1, you know, from the bridge, NY1 to Gugulethu police station. This bus was transporting white officers, every morning seven o'clock they would drive past, you know, this area, NY1, you know. And then and them, that unit [his unit which was commanded by "Dread man"] wanted to do something, you know, about that bus. They wanted to ambush the bus, all of us wanted to ambush that bus, you know, we thought it was, you know, a right thing to do then, you know, like, to kill these, ah, like, white officers in this bus and then we thought that, I thought that when I saw that, I thought that, you know, the guerrillas, you know, that I was introduced to by [Dread man], you know. I thought that at last, you know, they've managed to, you know, to ambush, you know, the bus that used to transport the white officers and then we were very happy, you know.

Comrade Bonginkosi knew what was happening in Gugulethu and the route of the bus transporting the white officers. This knowledge about the events in NY1 indicates that he was a "watcher of the community". He wanted to ambush and kill the white police officers. His longing for revenge and killing was strengthened by his belonging to the group of 'revolutionaries'.

What is interesting here is the language Comrade Bonginkosi uses to describe what was happening in Gugulethu. He does not use the term 'violence' in any of his descriptions but another type of language: "the gunshots", "killing another black guy", "it was chaotic", "raid house by house", "to ambush the bus" and so forth. He uses a combination of war metaphors and our everyday representations of violence. How do we speak of violence in a situation where gunshots are normalised and celebrated? This begs the question: When and how do we speak about violence? The language used by Comrade Bonginkosi and the other ex-combatants provides insight into how they speak about violence in different contexts.

I realized that I was participating after that scene, I was participating in the struggle unconsciously, you know, because I would just react, you know, to any event, you know, not planning it, you know ... *Ja*, I know, I must say, you know, that, you know, most the things, most of the activities that I participated in, you know, I did that without, you know, understanding, you know, the real, you know, purpose and, you know, the dangers that are there, you know.

Despite what he says, Comrade Bonginkosi's narrative suggests that he was conscious of what he was doing and aware of the underground activities in Gugulethu because he was taught to follow the sound of gunshots.

## Participating Consciously in the Struggle

According to Comrade Bonginkosi's narrative, his becoming a combatant was occasioned by more than his exile experiences. It began at home, with elders' responsibility to educate and inculcate a 'revolutionary' ideology. Comrade Bonginkosi's journey of becoming a guerrilla was influenced partly by events in Gugulethu, the teachings of older people and 'revolutionaries' about the struggle and by his friends who went into exile before him:

There was a boy that I used to go to school with, you know, like, and then that same year, you know, he went to exile, you know, like, they left me, you know, like, ah, they didn't told me about going to exile and then we were a group of more than 20 boys, you know, our unit, you know, and then this, I was close to this guy who, you know, and then I realized later that these guys, they went to exile, you know, and joined the liberation movement and then after that I also wanted to go to exile, you know, and then that's when I realized that I need to join, you know, the struggle consciously and then participate in the struggle and then that's how I joined the liberation movement called the People's Liberation Army. A year following the incident, after, I would say, after nine months after the incident I saw myself being trained as, you know, as a guerrilla myself, you know, and then we were trained as guerrillas, you know.

In exile, Comrade Bonginkosi was taught to protect his nation, to dedicate his life to it and to extend his family love to his nation: "What I'm doing in my family I must extend it, you know, must not do it just to my sisters and brothers only; I must do it for the nation". His experience of smelling gunpowder when he fired a gun changed him from a civilian into a guerrilla, from an ordinary person (a "watcher of the community") into a killer:

I started to smell the gunpowder, you know, like, ah, the gunpowder which is something, you know, ah, a different experience, you know, like the gunpowder, when you fire a gun, you know, like, you know, all those things and then I started to hurt people, you know, because I was trying to be aggressive, you know, to inflict pain, you know, to take life.

Extending family love to the nation is political and guerrilla language aimed at indoctrination. It is an ideology that gives meaning to the sacrifice of guerrillas who are homesick. The nation is given priority over a combatant's life and family. What made the sacrifice possible for Comrade Bonginkosi was political education and physical training in the camps.

## Legitimising 'Repossession'

While Comrade Bonginkosi was in exile, he was taught about Pan-Africanism. He and other comrades were led to identify the white man as their enemy. They were taught the history of South Africa and what whites did to their grandfathers, like the Xhosa king Hintsa, whose head was shipped to Britain after he was murdered (see Lalu 2009). They were taught about 'repossession', or taking back from and killing the white man:

Slogans such as "One settler, one bullet," you know, we were made to kill and destroy the white nation, you know. But that's what we were told to do, you know, that's what we were trained to do, you know, destroying the white regime, you know, even killing the individuals, you know, the white people that I meet on the streets, you know and then we were told to repossess, you know, our belongings, you know, like that means, you know, we must be violent toward the white person. If you come into a white person house you must, you know, like repossess, take back, you know, whatever they had in that house, it's yours, you know, like that's what, you know, and then I started to inflict pain to other people, you know and then take, you know, things by force, you know, like from the other people, you know, like white people, to break their houses, steal their cars, you know, like, take their belongings, you know, kill them.

The excerpt reveals the ways in which Comrade Bonginkosi was not only physically trained but also emotionally and ideologically trained to differentiate between the guerrillas and what he termed the 'settlers'. When he returned from exile, Comrade Bonginkosi joined a repossession unit in which the members were told to rob banks, repossess white property and bring the money to the commanders. They would use the money to fund the struggle. Comrade Bonginkosi started to hijack white peoples' cars and break into their homes because he was told to do so and because he thought that by doing so he was "balancing the imbalance", bridging the gap between the whites and the blacks. In Comrade Bonginkosi's narrative, the language of war – "whites as enemies" – transcends post-liberation war narratives. The way in which repossession was legitimised as redistribution testifies to how crime is politicised in his narrative.

In 1993, Comrade Bonginkosi and other APLA comrades were arrested and imprisoned for nine months for their involvement in repossession activities. He was later released and integrated into SANDF, in which he served as a military instructor. He did not last long in SANDF, however, as he was arrested and imprisoned again for seven years after being accused of fighting gangsters during a posting in Kimberley.



After being released from prison in 2006, Comrade Bonginkosi found it difficult to survive as he failed to find employment. He was tempted to fall back on crime and regarded the time when he was robbing banks as a period of “taking money the way I used to”. He notes that criminals in Gugulethu approached him to be part of their activities so that they could benefit from the skills he acquired in the struggle. According to Comrade Bonginkosi, these criminals always asked him, “How do you survive, you’ve got these skills, why don’t you use them?” This was difficult for him as he felt anger at not receiving assistance from the government when he was hungry. He suppressed and continues to suppress his anger, not engaging in criminal activities. He regards himself as someone who has been transformed, who understands violence well enough not to engage in it.

Comrade Bonginkosi’s story continues to evolve. It is an ongoing narrative of personal conflict, peace and violence in which he continually makes a distinction between being unconscious and conscious: “I realised what is it I was involved in, you know, I’m still on a journey of trying to find out, you know because it’s like I was in my dreams when I participated in all these things when all these things happened, now I’m awake”. He suggests that unconscious participation in violence – from his boyhood through to his violence against Kimberley gangsters as an adult – haunts his life. What is interesting here is how Comrade Bonginkosi remembers such ‘unconscious’ moments and the meanings he attaches to them. He understands violence as moments of unconsciousness, while I understand his involvement in violence as a choice. He subscribed to the teachings about repossession in exile, which blurred the line between political violence and personal involvement in criminal violence. What makes crime/violence political is the motive for engaging in it and what can be achieved through it. So, here, I can speak of the politicisation of crime and the criminalisation of politics, which is evident in Comrade Bonginkosi’s narrative.

Comrade Bonginkosi’s desire to become “peaceful” began in prison. According to Foucault (1977), prison is a space of punishment and discipline that organises what might be called ‘disciplinary careers’ in which the criminal past can be rejected. After seven years of imprisonment, Comrade Bonginkosi was released and decided to embark on a peaceful journey. However, he is still invited to engage in crime and rob banks. The narrative juxtaposes the capacity to be peaceful or to be a ‘peace ambassador’ and the capacity to engage in crime. Comrade Bonginkosi’s narrative revolves around being unconsciously caught up in violence and later being conscious about violence, but the mother of his child and the people around him do not like the “new person” in him, this peaceful Bonginkosi. This is evident when Comrade Bonginkosi speaks about the

challenges and painful journey of being a peace ambassador: “Sometimes you lose hope and then and it’s easy for me to just use my skills, you know, take a spade and dig a hole and take something out and go and rob the bank with me gang”. Despite his being a peace ambassador, Comrade Bonginkosi’s imagining of the gun is unavoidable. He is very conscious of the skills and materials he can use to rob a bank and with whom he could work. Here again, he is conscious of what violence can bring into his life, thus violence is seen on the side of the good. Military skills, a theme I will explore below, are a resource that can be utilised when the peaceful journey is challenged by circumstances. This theme also emerges in the narrative of an exiled Zimbabwean soldier living in South Africa, which I present next.

## Comrade Khumalo’s Narrative

Comrade Khumalo is an exiled Zimbabwean soldier living in South Africa. Born in 1968, he witnessed the independence struggle in Zimbabwe as a young boy. He was educated in multiracial schools but is also a product of mass education after independence. He had no intention of becoming a soldier, instead hoping to become an electrician. Because his older brother was in the military and lost an eye and three fingers during the armed struggle, he decided to join the army in 1986 with the 6th Brigade. Comrade Khumalo received training from a special force commando unit at *Wafa Wafa* training camp (meaning “we don’t care about those who die during training”). He was also sent to Egypt for training in anti-terrorism tactics, and was later trained as a military journalist in Harare. Over the years, he was deployed in Mozambique, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In the post-2000 Zimbabwean crisis, Comrade Khumalo was suspected of being a supporter of the opposition political party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by Morgan Tsvangirai. He was victimised by his army brigadier on a daily basis and demoted from staff sergeant to corporal. Although he had no previous intention of living abroad, he decided to desert the army to seek refuge in South Africa in 2007. Upon coming to South Africa, he was granted asylum seeker status, which he still holds. He is the founder of AMMOZA, established in 2007. He mobilised exiled soldiers to get involved in the group.

Comrade Khumalo joined the army when it was not as involved in politics as it became in the post-2000 crisis period. He regards the military training he went through as superior because

recruits were taught not to be involved in politics: “We were taught upon entering military that surrender all your ZANU-PF t-shirt, surrender everything. We don’t want politics here, we want to train, we taught perfect military men”. He notes that the military training was tough. The recruits were never allowed enough sleep during training, awakened throughout the night by military instructors. Early in the morning, before they were given breakfast, they would go for road run, wash and then go for a drill. The idea of this military training was to ‘remove’ civilian thoughts and instil military thinking. After six months of basic training, Comrade Khumalo volunteered to join the special force commando unit for further training in military tactics. Passing a tough selection process and completing the hard training, he became a commando.

After being sent to Egypt to train in anti-terrorism tactics, he did paratrooping at Manyame air base in Harare, and then was sent to the Mozambican war. He killed during the war. When he was withdrawn from Mozambique, he did a special investigation course and worked as a military policeman. This brought him into conflict with the chief of staff, whom he tried to arrest for defrauding soldiers of their money. After this, Comrade Khumalo went through a period of instability as he was transferred from unit to unit.

When Comrade Khumalo was eventually posted to X Brigade, it was preparing for a peacekeeping mission in Angola. His name was seconded to M Infantry Unit because he could speak Portuguese. He was deployed in Angola, where he stayed for close to a year. In Angola, he understood his duties to entail being a protector of human rights, rather than a killer as in Mozambique:

In the army if you don’t shoot you get shot. In fighting it’s not me who declared war, I was sent to go and fight, so we went there, we fought but the only difference was that in Angola though we were not fighting.

At the end of 1997, the brigade was withdrawn from Angola. In 1998, Comrade Khumalo completed his advanced studies at a private college in Kwekwe and was then deployed to the Democratic Republic of Congo. When he returned in 2002, he found that the situation in the barracks had changed. The army was now into politics and many of the soldiers were victimised for being suspected of supporting the MDC. This led to Comrade Khumalo’s desertion.

In 2007, upon coming to South Africa, Comrade Khumalo mobilised ex-soldiers to form AMMOZA, with the aim of helping army deserters to come together to share their problems in exile. He mentions that the association is for former soldiers only:

So we say let us now gentlemen form our own organisation that is totally military, no civilian, no policemen, no what, because a policemen has got his own way of being dealt with but a military is a military men with his own language, when a soldier is talking to another soldier they have got one language.

Comrade Khumalo sees himself and other soldiers as different from civilians. He notes that he finds it difficult to associate with civilians because they have different problems that require a different kind of intervention. His main concern is that the ex-soldiers receive amnesty and their pensions, and that they are recognised by the Zimbabwean government and reinstated in the army: “We said you know what since we are fighting the government of the Zimbabwe we want to be reinstated in the military. We want our pensions back, we want amnesty”.

## Soldiers’ Identities and Military Skills

While in Comrade Bonginkosi’s narrative civilians were a linchpin of the struggle in the townships, where ‘revolutionaries’ like Christopher Piet asked civilians to help them by hiding their weapons in their homes, Comrade Khumalo’s narrative reveals that for him there are two things that distinguish a soldier from the civilian: the skill to use a gun and discipline. He views civilians as people who lack the skills to deal with central intelligence forces in Zimbabwe and whose organisations can easily be infiltrated as compared to those of trained soldiers. Because Comrade Khumalo has the skill to kill, he sees himself as different from civilians.

In his narrative, he suggests that it is more difficult for a soldier to be transformed into a civilian than the other way around. Discipline is the core of the military, and for Comrade Khumalo it guides the soldier when to use the gun to kill or not to kill:

I, to start off I have got military discipline, a civilian is not disciplined. There are two different people to start off with, our way of talking; our way of thinking is totally different. I am conditioned in a military way of thinking and a civilian is conditioned in natural thinking that is natural training because no training was put into him, he had his mother’s training but myself I have national organisation training in my head. I am moulded to a certain blinkered way of doing things to the extent that when I come to the civilians in as much as I wish to be like this other person; this is oil and water we cannot mix.

While he continues to imagine the gun, to use it for survival, Comrade Khumalo reiterates that military discipline helps him not to engage in armed robbery. The imagining of guns speaks to both issues: as a skill and as potential violence. Like Comrade Bongingosi, Comrade Khumalo notes that hunger motivates former soldiers to think about engaging in crime when they normally would not:

When I become hungry obviously they say that the worst thinking is the one closest to you. I cannot eat a cake that is in Britain when there is water here, I'll just do what I know best, take a gun and start robbing because you are not assisting me although I am not saying that is what we are doing. We are merely saying that people must come to our assistance.

This can be linked to Comrade Bonginkosi story and fits with his narrative on the threat of violence and imagining guns in post-combat life. While Comrade Khumalo does not possess a gun, the imagination is there. He notes that when he sees South African police with guns, he thinks about taking the guns because the police are not alert. However, because he views himself as a well-trained soldier with discipline, Comrade Khumalo does not engage in crime.

Like the stories of South African ex-combatants in this report, Comrade Khumalo's narrative is an ongoing one. It is a story characterised by disappointment. What is similar to the narratives of APLA comrades is the continuation of military identity. The imagining of guns is very similar to that in Comrade Bonginkosi's narrative on considering using his military skills to earn a living. The gun in the two narratives has remained an alternative means of surviving in a highly unequal society. Another similarity in the narratives is that the ex-combatants remain deployed within associations.

## Comrade Mthuthulezi's Narrative

Comrade Mthuthulezi was born in 1971 in Gugulethu. His story yields two themes that have already emerged in the narratives above: possession of military skills and celebration of military identity. Comrade Mthuthulezi remembers June 16, 1976, when he was in primary school, as the day he first experienced apartheid. Comrades arrived and took the children out of school. On this day, he saw people in his area being beaten by police officers. Comrade Mthuthulezi also first experienced politics while he was at school, as some teachers were supportive of the struggle. In 1980, he joined the Christian Movement 9 (CM) at school so that he could go to churches to talk and debate about politics. The CM operated underground because during that time many political organisations were banned. Priests in the Catholic Church helped them to arrange meetings. In 1985, Comrade Mthuthulezi joined the student strike that spread through schools in Gugulethu, Nyanga, Langa and Mbekweni. During the school protests, they were supported and transported by taxi drivers. Comrade Mthuthulezi's discussion of the involvement of taxi drivers shows that the school boycotts were not driven only by school children but rather aided by others. He recalls a student named Sithembele Mathiso who was shot by a white policeman and died on the spot in NY1 in Gugulethu.

This killing drove Comrade Mthuthulezi to engage in anti-apartheid politics in Gugulethu. For Comrade Mthuthulezi, experiencing violence in Gugulethu and witnessing whites killing blacks made him hate whites, who became his community's enemies:

Now we beat them up in the township, we burn them, we demolish everything, we burn everything. A car for the police, we burn it. Now they found out that we are burning even bottle stores, we entered and burned bottle stores, we burned post offices, everything belonging to the government. We saw if that was the white system, it was supported by the white system; we burn it in the township.

Comrade Mthuthulezi's narrative is similar to that of Comrade Bonginkosi, in the sense that the killing of a colleague motivated him to join the ranks of APLA. Comrade Mthuthulezi was also in the scouts, and the scout master was a PAC member who encouraged his charges to join the PAC. Comrade Mthuthulezi notes that during apartheid, comrades would come together and share political stories. They spent their free time listening to their favourite music, reggae, and to messages from Bob Marley and Peter Tosh. They were also taught the theories of Marcus Garvey and about the racist politics of apartheid. Even though they had intimate relationships with people who were not part of the struggle, politics was a priority for the comrades. Sometimes they would pretend to people in their communities that they were going to the library to read books, when they were in fact gathering information about the struggle and giving it back to their 'commanders'. In 1988, they formed the Pan African Students Organization (PASO) as the student wing of PAC. PASO organised the killing of white teachers and headmasters in schools, as they were seen as working against student movements. The arrests of PASO members angered many students and inspired them to join APLA:

Only one thing we had to do now, it was to join the military wing of PAC. There's no other option less we are soldiers, better right now. Now because now it was red [heating up], now it was hot, you see, and when it is hot [with the country in chaos], now we cannot turn back we've gone too far, now the journey we have travelled is too long.

## Becoming a Combatant

Comrade Mthuthulezi was trained by APLA inside South Africa. During his guerrilla training, he met different people from various areas of the country. Comrade Mthuthulezi struggled to fit in with the group, but because he had been in the PAC before joining APLA, it was easier for him to adjust to his training and PAC principles than for many. The recruits were taught politics by political

commissars. APLA engaged them in military training and also by lecturing them on politics. They were trained to be politically savvy, to be freedom fighters and to be able to run the country economically, psychologically and politically. Comrade Mthuthulezi views himself as mature combatant as a result of his training:

I am mature; because I was developed from stage one to stage two to stage three. Now, *ja*, we trained in the APLA military, we were trained and there was no time to sleep in the APLA, because most of the time you were trained, you had to around three and four in the morning wake up to do physical training, the guerrilla warfare training. In the afternoon we come back and go to the classes, late we do physical training. Now the programme was always busy, you see, some of the night, at night we would stay up and sing like that-like that, you see. Now sometimes we train to know ourselves.

Here, Comrade Mthuthulezi speaks about himself as a politically liberated ex-combatant, one whose mind was liberated during the struggle and has a responsibility to other people. What comes out of this excerpt is that while many believe this military training only transformed civilians into guerrillas, he holds that it was also responsible for nurturing boys into men. His comment on training and singing through the night enables us to understand the difficulty of his military training and the ways in which his instructors controlled the recruits so that they became physically fit and prepared to understand the political lessons they were being taught. In this case, nighttime training opened recruits to accepting whatever ideology they were taught during the day. They become open recipients instead of questioning what they were taught.

APLA recruits who remained inside South Africa became responsible for organising the political movement. They provided security for the PAC and protected the leadership and PAC members, communities and information. Comrade Mthuthulezi also recruited youths into APLA:

We had different mastering. To say others were specialising in the intelligence, some of them, you see some of them were specialising in combat of fear. Now some of them they left to exile, others we turn back that we come back to be here again to organise the organisation. We created the part of VIP prioritisation of the party, now who runs the party, and again we recruit other, youth to join APLA, because if we all left and no one coming back, no one would have joined APLA. Now what we use that we must be inside in the community to recruit others at school, even outside the school.

Comrade Mthuthulezi reveals that APLA targeted gangsters to recruit them in their rank and file: “And that period we spoke to the gangsters, because in the meantime gangsters rose. Whereby we decided that, no let’s go to make peace against those gangsters and we recruit those gangsters to the APLA.”

After 1994, Comrade Mthuthulezi was integrated into the navy, but he was not granted the rank and appointment he expected after having been an intelligence officer in APLA. He felt betrayed by the DRR process and witnessed some comrades from MK being continually taunted by senior white officers. He feels that he was not treated fairly and that the navy was racist. He went AWOL and was discharged from SANDF after being arrested and appearing before a court martial. His life back in the township was difficult. Instead of providing for his family, he had to rely on his grandmother to survive. For a while, Comrade Mthuthulezi worked as a security guard, but this did not last as he did not have the required security licence. SANDF initially offered ex-combatants a security course that included VIP protection training, but the course was soon cancelled. Comrade Mthuthulezi argues that white officers sabotaged the course.

Comrade Mthuthulezi's stories about being back in the township are stories of endurance:

I went back to the township; it's not easy, hey! I developed stress, I was stressed, I was under stress. I drank a lot of alcohol, because I was saying hey! No me too now I am useless. You don't know now where to start and go where. It took me about more than three to four years stressed. I am not working, I am stressed, my family they are feeding me, and my grandmother is feeding me, I stayed for a while without a relationship. The shoes were finished now [raising his voice]. It came to a point whereby I had only one underwear, no I could see now it is really bad, you see [laughing], it is really bad, that hey, ha-ah even 10 rand, you see, you were in need of it for six months, 10 rand. You can see yourself now that no, nothing and you don't care. You fall asleep drunk and wake up drunk, sleeping with your clothes on and you don't mind, you see.

He decided to change his attitude towards life. He began working with other ex-combatants in Gugulethu and visited CSV, through which he received counselling.

Comrade Mthuthulezi believes that the government has forgotten about ex-combatants and that their role in the liberation struggle is not recognised:

But today we are forgotten, because for we are forgotten, because the role we played at a young age. Because if when I look at people whom I studied with, my class mates today have good careers. And one of them said, hey you were very genius in class, now we expect that you are a doctor, but. It was my goal to be a doctor, but because of the sacrifice in the part of the struggle.

Like most war veterans, Comrade Mthuthulezi views himself as having sacrificed his life to gain freedom for others. He also juxtaposes his current marginalised position with that of other people who were not involved in the struggle. For him, those who were never in the struggle are far better off than many of the ex-combatants in South Africa.



Comrade Mthuthulezi believes that he has a responsibility to provide security for his neighbours instead of guarding strangers' property. He considers the community to be much more important, and draws such principles from APLA:

Now we want to change as combatants the strategy of security, not that you watch a person being robbed. But you can go and guard someone's assets, but it is very important that you guard your neighbours, do you understand. Is where we did security from the APLA, it is why they say it's a people's army.

However, his is a narrative of betrayal and disappointment. Comrade Mthuthulezi views his discharge from the navy as a time of disgruntlement. What is interesting is how combatants who acrimoniously left the military talk about underwear as the only thing they were left with: "It came to a point whereby I had only one underwear". One exiled Zimbabwean ex-soldier I interviewed also talked about underwear as the only thing he has left after 21 years in the military. This is an indication of their frustration at the sense of having wasted their time. While this sense cannot be generalised to all ex-combatants, many now feel disappointed by their military careers and not having secured a better life.

Comrade Mthuthulezi's narrative suggests a desire to work in security that seems to stem from the comfort and attraction of working with guns and violence. Currently, he, along with several other ex-combatants, is involved in recruiting township youth into anti-crime programmes that focus on community protection. He admits, however, that it is difficult to deal with the youths because of a lack of resources.

Below, I further draw out the themes that emerge in the three narratives, particularly relating to post-combat life, providing insight into the ways in which transition is or is not expressed in the life histories.

## The Language of 'Repossession'

In the early 1990s, when APLA ex-combatants in exile returned home, the notion of 'repossession' and the violence it entails became dominant in their ranks. It was a kind of violence they were taught during their training: retaliating against the 'settler' by killing and looting what APLA ex-combatants viewed as the "white man's property". 'Repossession' can also be understood as the politicisation of inequality, which justifies and politicises crime and violence, particularly when

viewed through a racial lens. This speaks to the continuity of the politics of pre-1994 and the 'unfinished agenda' of the transition.

Criminal violence among APLA ex-combatants was justified as redressing colonial injustices. Lodge (1995) notes that the period of 1990–94 began with the unbanning of the PAC and closed with the PAC's suspension of its armed struggle. This period was characterised by a significant number of APLA 'repossession' operations. In Comrade Bonginkosi's narrative, the language of repossession is explicitly formulated as one that was inculcated into APLA ex-combatants when they were in exile. It was a practice that funded combatants' individual and collective operations. Lodge (1995) notes that such operations were facilitated by PAC's internal rules. Thus, Comrade Bonginkosi does not take the blame for the repossession violence he committed onto himself but rather transfers it onto the APLA leadership. He justifies his involvement in the repossession unit as follows:

We were made to identify a white person as an enemy, you know, just, you know, to use that blanket approach that, you know, white people are our enemies, you know. Slogans such as "One settler, one bullet," you know, we were made to kill and destroy the white nation, you know. But that's what we were told to do, you know, that's what we were trained to do, you know, destroying the white regime, you know, even killing the individuals, you know, the white people that I meet on the streets, you know and then we were told to repossess, you know, our belongings, you know, like that means, you know, we must be violent toward the white person. If you come into a white person house you must, you know, like repossess, take back, you know, whatever they had in that house, it's yours, you know, like that's what, you know, and then I started to inflict pain to other people, you know and then take, you know, things by force, you know, like from the other people, you know, like white people, to break their houses, steal their cars, you know, like, take their belongings, you know, kill them.

As Comrade Bonginkosi describes it, repossession was largely perceived as 'redistribution' of wealth rather than a crime. Repossession was seen as a means of rectifying the economic and political inequalities in South Africa before, and after, 1994. The ways in which repossession was legitimised as redistribution testifies to how crime was politicised by combatants and ex-combatants. Gear notes that a 'robbery unit', later also referred to as a 'repossession unit', was established in the late 1980s to "fund the armed wing" (2002:29). Because the South African economy remained highly unequal after 1994, the ex-combatants felt that they had the responsibility to use criminal actions to take what they thought belonged to them. The idea of repossession made it difficult to distinguish between what was political and criminal. Harris (2006)

argues that the distinction between political and criminal remains blurred among ex-combatants in South Africa.

## Demilitarising the Mind?

A central finding in this report is the continuing militarisation of the ex-combatants' minds and communities. The discussion on ex-combatants as 'defenders' of the community above demonstrates that the militarised mind is reinforced not only by individuals but also by the community. While in post-combat life many ex-combatants are expected to leave behind what they learnt or experienced in war and military formations, this seems impractical in their everyday lives. The community becomes another terrain where they face expectations that they will practice what they learnt in war. While the ex-combatants interviewed for this research say they are not involved in violence, their mindset continues to be militarised. Some are on a "peaceful journey" and others are now born-again Christians, but they all continue to imagine the gun and view their military skills and identities as a possible means of earning a living. Thus, despite South Africa's DDRR process, the reintegration of these ex-combatants as civilians into their communities is just a mirage.

The ex-combatants I interviewed grew up in the midst of violent political conflict, which means that they were already militarised before undergoing military training. Hence, demilitarising the mind entails not just undoing military training but also undoing militarised childhoods. Nonetheless, military training transforms civilians into combatants and legitimises the use of violence to counter violence and difficult situations. Gear (2002) argues that ideological militarisation legitimises violence as a natural and viable means of problem solving. Combatants are indoctrinated, trained to become professionals in using the gun in order to protect the nation, identify the enemy and kill, and thereby transformed from civilians into combatants.

While military training is not the only form of militarisation, I will focus on it here because it throws light on the ways in which combatants are made. As mentioned above, not all ex-combatants involved in the liberation struggle in South Africa received military training. According to Gear (2002), many APLA ex-combatants only attended a one-week weapons handling course. Those I interviewed, however, were either trained in exile or internally, and some were integrated into the SANDF, where they received further formal training. All the Zimbabwean ex-soldiers living in South Africa received military training in Zimbabwe. Woodward (2000) notes that military

training is the acquisition and development of a collection of physical and mental attributes required for undertaking the tasks necessary for waging war. For Woodward, becoming a soldier requires complete commitment and determination. The transformation into a soldier means training for life during which the values and attributes associated with the 'warrior hero' are inculcated into the individual. Military training deliberately shapes the recruit into a "professional in violence" (Barrett 1996:132).

So, the question is whether it is possible to demilitarise an individual who has undergone military training and acquired an ideology of violence in the process. What has generally been called demilitarisation is more a national administrative task in transition than an effort to understand individual ex-combatants' subjective thoughts and everyday experiences. For Gear (2002), the most critical objective of demilitarisation is to delegitimise the use of violence and the values that underpin it. She argues that demilitarisation requires uprooting the ideologies that support violence. However, according to Harris (2006), demilitarisation is conventionally understood as just one component of DDRR. In addition, as Gear (2002; 2005) shows, DDRR processes occur under the pressures of political settlements, and thus focus on formal armed formations. Gear (2002) argues that DDRR processes should be extended to informal and paramilitary formations.

While my argument is informed by other scholars' thinking on demobilisation and demilitarisation, such as Mashike (2000), Gear (2002), Harris (2006) and Dzinesa (2008), my emphasis is different. I argue that we should concentrate not only on taking away ex-combatants' weapons but also on the neglected task of trying to explore the possibilities of demilitarising ex-combatants' minds in relation to their communities. Hanson argues that "donors have the mistaken the idea that as soon as you get guns out of their hands, [combatants] are suddenly innocuous human beings again but that is not the case at all" (2007:6). After more than 10 years of being a combatant, Comrade Bonginkosi, like the other interviewees, holds his military skills close. If peace does not hold in a country, ex-combatants may quickly return to fighting because they can profit from it (Hanson 2007). Kingma (2005) and Mashike (2007) note that a lack of economic opportunities and the possession of military skills has led ex-combatants to engage in crime. In Mashike's view, ex-combatants also use the threat of crime and violence to draw the attention of politicians. It is therefore important for post-conflict and transitional countries to adopt a careful long-term programme that continuously engages ex-combatants, socially, economically, emotionally and politically, particularly those living in areas as economically marginalised as South

Africa's townships. As Hoffman (2011) argues, DDRR programmes must offer ex-combatants realistic post-war incomes. This is supported by Comrade Khumalo's narrative:

At the end of the day when I become hungry obviously they say that the worst thinking is the one closest to you. I cannot eat a cake that is in Britain when there is water here. I'll just do what I know best take a gun and start robbing because you are not assisting me.

In situations where ex-combatants do not receive adequate assistance, the gun remains a point of reference for sustaining the lives of many who have experience of war. The fact that they might not have a gun does not mean that the gun is out of their minds, but rather that their minds continue to live in the past, that of the gun. Hoffman (2011:39) asserts that the threat of ex-combatants engaging in violence exists in an abstract, broad sense. This violence has no particular object or target, (to use a war metaphor) no enemy, but is simply a threat to once again begin the paying labours of enacting violence. What also comes out of the narratives is that the gun is something ex-combatants can use without any hostility attached, simply to bring food to the table. That is, the desire to use the gun is driven by what Alexander (1998) refers to as the "situation", to eke out a living without targeting particular people as enemies. Thus, ex-combatant violence is often carefully thought out and well executed. In fact, the ex-combatants I interviewed have an understanding of the good side of violence and see that it pays. I refer to this as the 'gun syndrome', which has contaminated the lives of many of the interviewees. Is it possible, then, for ex-combatants to become civilians? What is it that constitutes civilian life? Is it the social, economic and political life or the mind of a civilian?

Comrade Khumalo talks about the difficulties of becoming a civilian: "I am moulded to a certain blinkered way of doing things to the extent that when I come to the civilians in as much as I wish to be like this other person; this is oil and water we cannot mix". While civilians may think of ex-combatants as people who should be integrated into civilian life, ex-soldiers often have a different view. Becoming a civilian is not their priority partly because civilians do not understand the experiences of combatants. In addition, many ex-combatants see themselves as superior to civilians as a result of their training, valorising military skills even if they are not valued in the job market. What comes out of Comrade Khumalo's narrative is that being a combatant is not necessarily about having a gun or being physically in the barracks or the bush. One can still be a combatant in the aftermath of conflict. A soldier can leave the barracks but carries with him the military mind. As Comrade Khumalo states, "I am a military man ... We are still left in that military

state". I argue that it is often easier transform a civilian into a combatant than to transform a combatant into a civilian. If a transition process is characterised by transforming combatants into civilians, then that process must be based on understanding ex-combatants' minds.

In Comrade Bonginkosi's narrative, the combination of his family's lack of access to economic opportunities and his possession of military skills tempts him to rob banks for a living. The thought of robbing banks is thus motivated by his responsibility for feeding his family and his inability to do so. The other interviewees also make clear that family and community expectations are central in explaining the involvement of ex-combatants in crime. The family remains expectant in situations where ex-combatants are not meeting its needs. In such cases, ex-combatants are blamed for the suffering of their family members, who sometimes ask them to use their skills instead of allowing them to sleep without food. The lack of food angers the interviewees. This anger is ever present and often leads them to lose hope in life and peace. The impulse to engage in crime is encouraged by criminals, who approach ex-combatants to join criminal syndicates. In addition, ex-combatants may decide to threaten violence in order to draw the attention of politicians to their needs (Mashike 2007:14). In these cases, militarisation leads ex-combatants to view violence as a legitimate means of having their needs and demands met (Cock 2005:795).

For this reason, I argue that DRR processes must go beyond disarming ex-combatants and even providing them with short-term assistance. Ex-combatants need to be socially integrated for them to feel part of and accepted by their families and communities. This involves psychological adjustment so that ex-combatants stop seeing themselves as a social group associated with weapons and military skills (Mashike 2007). Since this is a long-term process, it requires us to rethink the association between political transition and demobilisation and demilitarisation. As De Waal (2003) argues, demilitarisation will remain a challenge for many post-conflict African states because they engage in what he terms 'loaded transitions', or in a short-term combination of social, economic and political transitions with decreasing engagement over time. Instead, the process of demilitarisation requires consistent engagement from ongoing transitional processes.

## Conclusion: Addressing the Continuity of Military Identities

Identities forged through resistance and combat continue to be reproduced in different ways in post-conflict society. Ex-combatants may perceive their military identities as the only way to establish themselves and gain recognition either as ‘defenders’ of the community or just as respectable community members. Vencovsky argues that “it may be a fallacy to expect ex-combatants who spent a number of years fighting to realistically access the opportunities available” (2006:264) to integrate in their communities. Their everyday interactions as a group are facilitated by their war identities, which define and position them within their communities. I observed during fieldwork that APLA ex-combatants mobilise each other to visit the Trauma Clinic for counselling, use a comrade’s taxi to get there and return as a group, identifying themselves as people who suffered during the struggle and continue to suffer. They come together to talk about their veterans association, how it should be restructured and possible opportunities for them to feed their families. I argue that military identity provides a social framework in which the social network remains intact. Military identities remain deployed, and thus the ex-combatants can mobilise each other to deal collectively with the challenges they face as a group. For example, they quickly re-band to defend a comrade who is being attacked, as Harris (2006:40) shows among officially disbanded SDUs and SPUs that continue to have allegiances, networks and a sense of brotherhood. They also mobilise to advocate for their interests and those of their communities in relation to government. Their identities here are not only the identities of war but are also co-constructed as marginalised identities, mainly due to government’s perceived lack of interest in the ex-combatants’ well-being.

Ex-combatants are seen as protective in a violent community. Not only do such identities protect the individual ex-combatant but also the ex-combatant’s family members. Comrade Bonginkosi talks about his identity as a violent person and how it has protected his child’s mother from muggings in the streets:

Nobody would touch her [referring to his wife] because people know me as this guy because I was attacked many times with her, you know, like, she, like, happened to witness, you know, what kind of a person I am, you know, when I used to protect us from different muggings, from different people, you know, I would fight them and all these things.

In situations where such identities are not used according to the expectations of those who need protection, ex-combatants are questioned and often seen as neglectful. Hence, what comes out of their narratives is that military identities are not only violent but also beneficial. Thus, while scholars such as Harris (2006) argue that military identities are sources of future violence, I suggest that they are also sources of recognition and status. Viewing military identities as purely violent obscures the fact that such identities are also productive in the community. The ways in which ex-combatant military identities move from being responsible for protecting the state to being responsible for protecting the family are interesting. Having been taught during training to extend their desire to protect their families to the nation, ex-combatants now extend their responsibility for protecting the state to their families. This transfer is not unproblematic: Hoffman (2011:40) suggests that the postcolonial condition leads individuals to deploy productively both life-giving and potentially lethal identities. Comrade Bonginkosi had such an experience:

The guys who burnt the house [his mother's house when he was in prison], they started to shoot my brother again [when Comrade Bonginkosi was back from prison], you know, threaten my family again [in his presence at home] and then people here, you know, they were saying like, [Bongi], do something, enough is enough, what were you trained for, you know, all those things and pressuring me to be violent again, fight fire with fire, you know.

While the continuation of military identities in transition can be seen as the current keyword for thinking about postcolonial violence, the question here is how do we expect ex-combatants to leave behind their military identities when they continue to be marginalised by government and live in areas characterised by violence? Military identities allow ex-combatants comparatively privileged position in their communities. Their military identities are the only legacies left to them: being identified as liberators. To borrow the idea of 'entitlement' from Sen (1992), the continuation of military identities is a claim of citizenship and entitlement, to who gets what and why. Currently, South African ex-combatants receive monthly vouchers worth R1,100 to buy food. The various entitlements attached to military identities make ex-combatants cling to them.

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of 'capital', I suggest that ex-combatants' military identities can be viewed as a form of capital. The capital here may be threefold: economic, cultural and symbolic. I do not intend to compartmentalise ex-combatants' ability to utilise their military identities as different from any other groups, like a gang's, which has similar skills. Rather, I understand their military identities as different because they are legitimised by an ideology inculcated and valorised during the struggle. In addition to giving them social networks and status,



ex-combatants' military skills offer their communities and families protection and the ex-combatants an opportunity to make a living. One example is that some interviewees from Nyanga East approached the Department of Social Development and argued that as a result of their experience as ex-combatants in their community, they are able to identify youth engaged in crime and draw them into development projects based on sports.

Military skills can therefore be understood as both negative and positive for ex-combatants, their families and community members. Their skills can be both beneficial and detrimental to the state. Military skills can also be 'consciously' or 'unconsciously' deployed. The history of the struggle in South African townships is of ex-combatants depending on the community, and now the ways in which they are involved in their communities means that ex-combatants' military identities are at times being used in a positive sense. What is carried over in transition by ex-combatants is the way they organise themselves and have a sense of responsibility to their communities.

The military skills learnt in the past are thus entrenched in ex-combatants' social world. Such skill "structures their world" and frames the way they understand the world around them, the state, their communities and their families, particularly in communities as militarised and unequal as those in South Africa. Military identity is a "product of history, which produces individual and collective practices in accordance with the schemes of history" (Bourdieu 1990:54). In this context, where military identities and skills, as well as the violence they can produce, can be both positive and negative for ex-combatants and their environments, demilitarisation requires a shift that is both internal (skills, identity and the mind) and external (community expectations, violent context and continued inequality). The DDRR processes adopted in South Africa and elsewhere in Africa facing similar challenges are therefore too short term and limited in scope to effect demilitarisation and true integration into peaceful civilian life. Rethinking DDRR does not have to occur only at the beginning of the process. Given that ex-combatants' experience of militarisation as well as transition is ongoing, states' as well as civil society's work with ex-combatants and their efforts to demobilise and reintegrate them can occur well after the moment of political transition and can involve ongoing engagement.

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