The Collective Body

Challenging western concepts of trauma and healing

"Post-traumatic stress syndrome" has been a widespread diagnosis for persons suffering through intense conflict, particularly soldiers returning home from war. Anthropologist Alcinda Honwana argues against its universality, suggesting that trauma and healing - as evidenced in Mozambique and Angola - is much more culturally specific...

Samuel was only nine years old when he was abducted by RENAMO rebels during a military attack on his village. He was asked to carry a bag of maize meal and walk for four days to the military camp. Three months later he had one month of military training and was forced to serve as a soldier for more than two years.

After the cease-fire Samuel was reunited with some of his relatives. The day of his arrival his relatives took him to the ndumba (house of the spirits), where he was presented to the ancestral spirits of the family. The boy's grandfather informed the spirits that his grandchild had returned, and thanked them for bringing him home alive. A few days later the family invited a traditional healer to help them perform a cleansing ritual for the young man. The ritual consisted of a series of symbolic procedures aimed at cutting his links with the traumatic past - with the war. His military clothes were burnt and he was cleansed with herbal remedies prepared by the healer. Only after this ritual was he able to freely interact with his relatives and other members of his community.

When a young man returns from war, before entering the family house he has to be taken to the river. In the river an elderly person treats him with water and the leaves of the *mululua* tree. The treatment in the river always takes place at dawn. In the middle of the river, in the flow, the former soldier has to drink herbal medicine made from *lulua*, *ngola* and *cassale* trees. The liquid extracted from the *mululua* leaves is splashed on his body. When he gets out of the river the young man cannot look back. Looking back is believed to open the door to the war spirits, inviting them to come and haunt him. The past, the war, has to flow away with the river.

These are common practices in the post-war period in Mozambique and Angola where people are struggling to bring back normality to their lives after devastating conflicts. These stories are multiplied countrywide and involve not only the afflicted person but also the relatives and the community at large. These cleansing rituals are centred around beliefs in the power of spiritual beings, central to people’s sense well-being and security. This article discusses processes of healing the social wounds of war of young combatants who were forcibly recruited to fight wars in
The present study emphasises the importance of cultural understandings of diagnosis, healing, mental distress and trauma; the ways people express, embody and give meaning to their afflictions are generally tied to a specific cultural context. In this perspective, biomedical psychotherapeutic notions of mental distress and trauma constitute 'western' social and cultural constructs, which may often not be effective in contexts where cultural beliefs and worldviews are different. The biomedical approach to healing war trauma should, thus, be regarded as only one of several ways of dealing with post-war healing in Africa, since there are other ways of understanding health and healing in post-conflict situations which are culturally specific.

The article results from research undertaken in Mozambique (1995-1996) and Angola (1997-1998) with war-affected children, especially child soldiers. Angola and Mozambique were both Portuguese colonies which after a long period of armed struggle for national liberation acceded to independence in 1975. Both post-colonial governments adopted a Marxist orientation and socialist models of development. After independence, opposition parties (RENAMO in Mozambique and UNITA in Angola) initiated a war against the FRELIMO and the MPLA governments. It is in the process of these enduring wars (lasting more than 15 years in Mozambique and more than 20 in Angola) that many children were drawn into armed conflict as active combatants. The examination of processes of healing the social wounds of war of these former child soldiers constitutes the aim of this article.

The first part of my discussion examines the social and cultural basis of war trauma by deconstructing the universality of models such as PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder) which is commonly applied to populations affected by conflict and political violence across the world. The second part looks at local understandings of trauma healing in Mozambique and Angola by discussing some case studies.

**Beyond post-traumatic stress disorder**

Dominant western psycho-therapeutic models are often seen as universal and applicable everywhere. However, this assumption has been challenged, as western psychology is also a culturally constructed system. Modern psychology locates the causes of psycho-social distress within the individual and devises responses which are primarily based on individual therapy (Gibbs & Boyden, 1996). Thus, recovery is achieved through helping the individual 'come to terms' with the traumatic experience, and healing is held in private sessions aimed at 'talking out' and externalising feelings and afflictions. The war-related mental disorder PTSD appeared in the 1980s in the U.S., and was based on research carried out with American veterans of the Vietnam war. This type of mental disorder is firmly grounded in these modern psychological paradigms.

The situation appears to be diverse in other socio-cultural contexts. For example, Boyden & Gibbs (1996) have shown that in Cambodia individual therapy conducted by modern psychotherapists can be ineffective because it does not account for the place that ancestral spirits and other spiritual forces have in the causation and healing processes. Second, by focusing exclusively on the individual it undermines family and community efforts to provide support and care. Likewise, studies on healing war trauma in Mozambique (Marato, 1996; Honwana, 1997,1999) have
shown that recalling the traumatic experience through verbal externalisation as a means to healing is not always effective. In many instances people would rather not talk about the past or look back, and prefer to start afresh once certain ritual procedures, which do not necessarily involve verbal expression of the affliction, have been performed.

Also characterising the PTSD approach is the fact that it was developed out of attempts to understand the problems faced by the American soldiers who fought in Vietnam. In this regard it was conceived as an instrument to deal with psychological distress in people who went from a situation of relative 'normality' into a traumatic experience (the war), and then returned to 'normality' - hence the prefix 'post'.

What happens in Mozambique and Angola, however, and in other conflict zones - especially in Africa - is that the vast majority of children we are dealing with today were born during the war. Angola's armed conflict has lasted more than 20 years. Thus, for these children trauma is not 'post', but rather current and very much part of their everyday life. Carolyn Nordstrom's (1997) work on war and violence in Mozambique stresses the fact that violence there goes well beyond military attacks, landmines and direct war situations, and touches on spheres like poverty, hunger, displacement and the like. In line with this argument one can say that most of the children we have been dealing with in the aftermath of the war in Angola are still living under violent and potentially traumatic circumstances. Therefore, when applying such models there is a need to adapt them to the concrete situations of the children in question.

**War trauma and the spirits of the dead**

In Mozambique and Angola there are local ways of understanding war trauma. In both countries people believe that war-related psychological trauma is directly linked with the anger of the spirits of those killed during the war. In southern Mozambique these spirits are called *Mipfhukwa* - spirits of those who did not have a proper burial to place them in their proper positions in the world of the ancestors. They are believed to be unsettled and bitter spirits who can cause harm to their killers or to passers-by. I discussed these type of spirits at length elsewhere (see Honwana, 1996; 1997). In Angola this is also a common phenomenon. All over the country people mentioned that the spirits of people killed during the war had to be appeased to ensure peace.

Social pollution constitutes an important factor in the context of post-war healing both in Angola and Mozambique. Pollution may arise from being in contact with death and bloodshed. Individuals who have been in a war, who killed or saw people being killed, are believed to be polluted by the 'wrongdoings of the war'. They are seen as the vehicles through which the spirits of the war dead might enter and afflict the community. These spirits may afflict not only the individual who committed the offenses but also the entire family or group. After the war when soldiers and refugees return home, they are believed to be potential contaminators of the social body. The spirits of the dead, which might haunt them, can disrupt life in their families and villages. Therefore, the cleansing process is seen as a fundamental condition for collective protection against pollution and for the social reintegration of war-affected people into society (Honwana, 1997).

I will next analyse several cases and discuss how families and communities heal the...
social wounds of war in the post-war period through ritual performance. However, not everybody performs cleansing and purification rituals or rituals to appease the spirits of the dead. Such practices are more common in the rural areas, although some people might perform them in urban settings. The availability of healthcare alternatives as well as religious and political affiliations determine the ways in which people make decisions concerning treatment of war trauma.

Rituals performed for former child soldiers are, therefore, aimed at dealing with what happened during the war. An acknowledgment of the atrocities committed and a subsequent break from that past are articulated through ritual performance. There are different types of rituals. Some rituals are addressed to those who have participated in the war but did not kill; others are particularly directed to those who killed other people. The latter are more complex and require the expertise of a traditional healer. It is believed that the spirits of the dead can drive the killer insane.

**Case one: Samuel's story**

Coming back to the case of Samuel referred to earlier, we can look in detail at what happened to him. As mentioned before, Samuel was first taken to his family *ndumba* and presented to the ancestral spirits. The family thanked the spirits for the boy's safe return, and later called in the traditional healer to assist with the cleansing process. The practitioner took the boy to the bush, where a small hut covered with dry grass was built. The boy, dressed in the dirty clothes he'd worn from the RENAMO camp, entered the hut and undressed. Then fire was set to the hut, and an adult relative helped the boy escape. The hut, the clothes and everything else that the boy brought from the camp had to be burned - symbolising a rupture with the past.

A chicken was sacrificed for the spirits of the dead and the blood spread around the ritual place. The chicken was then cooked and offered to the spirits as a sacrificial meal. After that the boy had to inhale the smoke of some herbal remedies, and bathe himself with water treated with medicine. In this way his body was cleansed both internally and externally. Finally, the spirit medium made some incisions in the boy's body and filled them with a paste made from herbal remedies, a practice called *ku thlavela*. The purpose of this procedure was to give strength to the boy. During this public ritual relatives and neighbours were present and assisted the practitioner by performing specific roles, or just by observing, singing and clapping.

**Case two: healing Pitango**

When Pitango from Cambandua in Angola returned home, his family organised a ritual for him. His body was washed with cassava meal and chicken blood was smeared on his forehead (the chicken was killed during the proceedings). Then his mother took some palm oil and rubbed it on Pitango's hands and feet. During these proceedings the ancestral spirits of the family were often called in to protect the young man back from the war, starting a new life. This was done through addresses made by elderly relatives. Pitango said that the elderly in his family, who spoke to him on his arrival, explained that the performance of this ritual was necessary so that the spirits of those killed in the war would not harm him. This was necessary for him to start a new life. Pitango also said that because he did not kill anybody in the war he did not need to go through a ritual performed by a *kimbanda* (traditional healer).
Case three: Nzinga's cleansing

Nzinga is a 55-year-old traditional healer in Malanje in Angola. When her 19-year-old nephew Pedro returned after spending more than seven years fighting the war alongside UNITA, she performed a ritual for him. When asked about it she said:

"I could not let him stay without the cleansing treatment. He needed it because there he might have done bad things like kill, beat and rob people ... without the treatment the spirits of the dead would harm him. I do not know what happened there, he said he did not do anything ... young people sometimes lie ... I decided to go for full treatment because otherwise he could become crazy or even die..."

Traditional healers generally perform the full treatment she refers to. It lasted four days and took place in her house. It required a chicken, a luando (mat) and some wine or 'traditional' beer. She put Pedro in a secluded place called a mwanza (place of ritual treatment) and there she lay the mat for him to sleep on. She put some powdered medicine (ditondo and dikezo) under the mat and in his food and drink. Pedro had to stay inside the mwanza for three consecutive days. At dawn on the fourth day he was taken to the river to be washed. After this he was not allowed to look back. He had to break with the past, and asking him not to look back at the river symbolised the break with the dirty war (the dirt of the war was washed from his body and left to go downriver). Back home Nzinga opened an egg, put some sugar and powdered medicine inside and threw it away, saying: You malevolent spirits, here is what you want - leave us now. The ritual chicken and drinks were prepared with medicine and Pedro ate and drank them throughout the duration of his treatment. During the ritual family members were present and contributed food and drink which they all shared during the proceedings.

In all these rituals is reflected the belief in the 'pollution' that the children bring home to their homes and villages - they have to be cleansed as soon as possible to be able to socialise freely with relatives and friends. In the case of Samuel, the cleansing ceremony happened a few days after his arrival and was performed by a specialist. Pitango was 'washed' with cassava meal, chicken blood, and palm oil the day of his arrival. Pedro's aunt decided to give a full treatment because she was not sure about what he had done during the war. In all cases, there was a symbolic break with the past: the washing of the body in the river so that the dirt of war would go away, the burning of the hut and the clothes brought from the war. It is interesting to see in all three cases the use of chicken in the rituals (the blood for cleansing and the meat for the sacrificial meal shared with the ancestors), and of herbal remedies to cleanse the body internally (inhaling and drinking) and externally (bathing and rubbing).

In these three cases the Cartesian dichotomy which separates body and mind cannot be applied, as individuals are seen as a whole body/mind composite and as part and parcel of a collective body (their wrongdoings can affect their families as well). This explains the direct involvement of the family (both the living and the dead - the ancestors) in the cleansing and healing processes. The ancestors are believed to have a powerful role in protecting their relatives against evil and misfortune. That is why Samuel's relatives took him to the hut of the ancestors and thanked them for the fact that he was alive and safe back home; Pitango's family also addressed the ancestors; and Nzinga put Pedro in the place of the ancestors for the duration of his
ritual treatment.

These healing and protective rituals do not involve verbal exteriorisation of the experience. Healing is achieved through non-verbal symbolic procedures, understood by participants. That is why clothes and other objects symbolising the past had to be burnt or washed away to impress on the individual and the group a complete rupture with that experience and the beginning of a new life. Recounting and remembering the traumatic experience would be like opening a door for the harmful spirits to penetrate the communities. Viewed from this perspective the well-meaning attempts of psychotherapists to help local people deal with war trauma may in fact cause more harm than help.

The performance of these rituals and the politics that precede them transcend the particular individual(s) concerned and involve the collective body. The family and friends are involved and the ancestral spirits are also implicated in mediating for a good outcome. The cases presented above show how the living have to acknowledge the dead (the past) - both the ancestors and the dead of the war in order to carry on with their lives. The rituals are aimed at asking for forgiveness, appeasing the souls of the dead and preventing any future afflictions (retaliations) from the spirits of the dead, severing in this way the links with that 'bad' past.

There is no doubt that these rituals are instrumental in building family cohesion and solidarity, and in dealing with the psychological and emotional side of these children's problems. The fact is, however, that the youth return to a countryside which remains as poor as it was when they left, with no job opportunities and no vocational schools. As mentioned before, these are also potentially traumatic experiences. While in Mozambique the end of armed hostilities gave rise to some degree of confidence and economic growth in Angola the war continues and children are being re-recruited into the military.

The situation of child soldiers in post-colonial conflicts in the continent is intrinsically linked with the crisis in state politics of power, identity and access to resources. Community mechanisms of healing, social rebuilding and conflict resolution are important, but on their own they cannot be a solution to the problem. Thus, these community interventions have to be complemented by job creation, skills training programmes and a general alleviation of poverty, in order to give these children and youths some prospect of a better future.

The examination of local healing strategies demonstrates that biomedicine and psychotherapy are but among many ways of understanding and healing distress and trauma. Considering that the majority of the Mozambican population affected by the war is rural, a combination of several healing approaches seems to be necessary in order to take into account patients' worldviews and systems of meaning. This article has suggested that the role of traditional healing systems in this regard cannot be ignored and needs to be part of the whole effort of dealing with the past and reconstituting the social fabric.

Traditional practitioners and elderly family members are already creating their spaces in these processes of healing the social wounds of war. They are not waiting for the government to bring the psychologists and other medical practitioners to solve their problems. They are using the means available to them to restore peace and stability in their communities.
Notes:

1. My work in Angola was possible thanks to a Christian Children's Fund (CCF) consultancy in 1997-1998. The Angolan data presented in this article was collected both by myself and by members of the CCF team in Angola. (Back to Text)

2. In the case of Mozambique, RENAMO (Mozambique National Resistance) was created in 1977 by the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) which was interested in sponsoring a rebel force within Mozambique in retaliation for FRELIMO'S (Mozambique Liberation Front's) support of ZANLA (Zimbabwe National Liberation Army) and for its Marxist policies. In 1980 RENAMO was later taken over by the South African security forces, to counter FRELIMO'S support of the African National Congress in the 1980s. In Angola UNITA (The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) was one of the movements which along with the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) and UPA-FNL (Popular Union of Angola and National Front for the Liberation of Angola) fought against Portuguese colonial rule. After the Portuguese were driven out in 1974, the three movements fought each other for control of the country. The MPLA emerged victorious, the UPA-FNL faded in importance and UNITA reconstituted itself with mainly American and South African support, continuing its fight against the MPLA government. (Back to Text)

References:


Alcinda Honwana is a Senior Lecturer in anthropology at the University of Cape Town.