

Review: Vilho Amukwaya Shigwedha, *The Aftermath of the Cassinga Massacre: Survivors, Deniers and Injustices*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2017.

The 4 May 1978 attack by South African Defence Force (SADF) paratroopers on the South West Africa Peoples' Organisation (SWAPO) camp at Cassinga 250 km inside Angola was hailed as an audacious and daring operation by the apartheid regime. Conversely, SWAPO claimed that it was a massacre of Namibian refugees and civilians. The controversy continues to generate as much heat as light. The battle lines have been drawn and both SADF apologists and SWAPO supporters seem more intent upon vindicating their positions than admitting flaws in their argument or lapses of judgment. Both sides are so intractable that neither is likely to re-evaluate, let alone change, its position.

Under the circumstances, there seems to be little likelihood that works on the subject of Cassinga can remain neutral. Shigwedha's book is no exception. He pointedly labels SADF participants in the raid 'deniers' of the massacre. He attempts to prove his point by reference to the SADF's own documentation. Thus, for instance, he cites a memo by General Constand Viljoen, Chief of the South African army, that enumerated 22 reasons why the SADF regarded Cassinga as a military base. Viljoen used this 'intelligence' to persuade Minister of Defence, P.W. Botha, that Cassinga was a bona fide military target. Botha, in turn, used the same argument to overcome Prime Minister B.J. Vorster's

reservations about Operation Reindeer. Shigwedha argues that "Vorster's reservations vindicate the argument that the SADF went to Cassinga with full knowledge and authority to kill civilians" (p. 15). This is a tendentious reading of the political calculations and military risks that Vorster would have had to consider before approving of the operation. Shigwedha holds that the SADF purposefully planned the operation to kill civilians, whereas McGill Alexander argues that mass killing of civilians was an unfortunate consequence of poor intelligence and the bombing and strafing of the camp.¹ In addition, Shigwedha reckons that "[t]here are several hints within their own discourse to corroborate arguments that Cassinga was a noncombatant facility" (p. 91). Indeed, Colonel Jan Breytenbach's use of the word 'slaughter' in connection with the clearing of trenches where occupants of Cassinga had sought refuge from the SADF attackers might well be construed as a tacit admission that the majority of them were unarmed.² The kill ratio suggests as much, too. But while the SADF has undoubtedly attempted to play down the extent of the killing, Shigwedha's contention that a massacre was systematically planned is not convincing and the killing of civilians and children is vehemently denied by participants in the attack. What cannot be refuted, however, is that Operation Reindeer resulted a gross

¹ Edward George McGill Alexander, *The Cassinga Raid*, MA Thesis, UNISA, 2003: 186.

² Jan Breytenbach, *Eagle Strike! The Story of the Controversial Airborne Assault on Cassinga 1978*, Sandton, Manie Grov, 2008: 154f.

violation of human rights and, arguably, a war crime.³

Shigwedha questions the existence of singular SADF and SWAPO narratives of Cassinga — an argument that I have made in the pages of this journal.⁴ While I would concede that there are variations on a theme, I stand by my claim that virtually all SADF paratroopers who participated in the attack tell much the same story. The only exception to the rule is Johan Frederick Verster (with whom Shigwedha seems unacquainted) who testified to the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (TRC) but whose credibility as a witness is extremely questionable on account of his involvement in political assassinations and other criminal activities. Although Shigwedha adduces the testimony of Pierre Hough in support of his contention that SADF paratroopers do not read off the same script, the latter does not admit that he and his comrades were party to a massacre either. Rather, Hough seeks recognition for what he regards as his starring role in the rearguard action in which the Cuban column's advance on Cassinga was countered. Likewise, the spat between Breytenbach and Brigadier Mike du Plessis is over who exercised leadership of the operation on the ground. In this case, it is a matter of claiming credit for commanding an

operation that is acclaimed in the annals of airborne operations rather than a difference of opinion over whether the SADF had committed a reprehensible deed or outrage. Hough and du Plessis might be 'dissenters' but they are certainly not 'moderates' as Shigwedha would have us believe. They are not at odds with their compatriots about the matter of culpability for the killing of innocent civilians. They, too, deny that there was a massacre. They may not find themselves welcome at reunions of self-styled 'Cassinga veterans' but they have not disrupted the hegemonic SADF version of events first constructed by the military journalist Willem Steenkamp,⁵ and since perpetuated by two participants, namely Breytenbach and Mike McWilliams.⁶

Shigwedha cites the testimony of one Cassinga survivor who claims that du Plessis went on a shooting spree and mercilessly shot dead the wounded at point blank range (pp. 51-53). It seems that he identified du Plessis as the perpetrator after being shown a photograph that depicts him with a (souvenir?) shoulder bag in the company of Breytenbach. Shigwedha's *modus operandi* appears to have been to induce Cassinga survivors to tell their stories and elicit their responses to photographs of the attack that he had reproduced for the express purpose of showing informants. This triggered

³ The TRC classified Cassinga in terms of the former and not the latter because the paradigm it employed was informed by the precepts of transitional justice rather than international law.

⁴ Gary Baines, "Conflicting memories, competing narratives and complicating histories: Revisiting the Cassinga controversy", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 6, 2009: 7-26.

⁵ Willem Steenkamp, *Borderstrike! South Africa into Angola*, Durban/Pretoria, Butterworth, 1983.

⁶ Mike McWilliams, *Battle for Cassinga: South Africa's Controversial Cross-Border Raid, Angola 1978*, Pinetown, South Publishers, 2011.

Shigwedha omits this text from the bibliography although he references it in his study.

memories, some of which were obviously traumatic for the survivors. Shigwedha sought to understand why the view was repeatedly expressed that the photographs did not capture the survivors' particular experiences. He observed that the subject matter of the 'iconic' photograph of the mass grave taken by the Italian cameraman Gaetano Pagano did not reflect the experience of survivors who lived with mental and physical scars as a result of the enduring violence perpetrated by the SADF paratroopers. Likewise, the photographs shot by the official SADF photographer, Mike McWilliams, did not reveal the harm done to their bodies and minds. These include the so-called 'immaculate photograph' which he regards as a sanitized shot of the 'two commanders' of the operation that screens the viewer's gaze from the massacre. Shigwedha is correct in suggesting that the select SADF photographs that have been archived and published are not 'innocent'. But he cannot be sure that "the SADF as well as individual paratroopers do not have the courage to distribute and disseminate horrific photographs of civilian casualties in Cassinga" (p. 61). Even if such exist, he offers no hard evidence of a conspiracy to prevent self-incriminating photographs from reaching the public domain.

Shigwedha holds that "[t]he near absence of factual evidence" which the photographs of Cassinga exhibit, "obscures the traumatic experience and suffering of those who survived the massacre as they narrate it" (p. 22). But images can hardly be expected to retrieve a "true picture of Cassinga" (p.

58). This amounts to a straw-man proposition and leads to a facile argument. For even if photographs of the perpetration — as opposed to the aftermath — of violence existed, how can they be expected to do justice to the experiences of the Cassinga survivors? Still photographs, by their very nature, are little more than selective and subjective traces of the past. Their literal value as evidence is limited. They might acquire enormous metonymic and symbolic value but they remain imperfect and partial representations of historical events. Shigwedha is well aware of this (see p. 52) but still expends much effort trying to explain the disjuncture between the fleeting images captured by photographers and the tangible experience of the survivors. He would have done better to have explored the disconnect between the personal memories of survivors and the narratives constructed by SWAPO and the SADF, respectively.

Shigwedha's stated aim is to "untie [sic] the problematic relationship between the representation of the Cassinga massacre through images and political rhetoric and the reality of Cassinga experienced by survivors" (p. 2). However, his engagement with the theory of photographic representation is convoluted and contradictory. He challenges the metaphoric [positivist? realist?] assumption that images convey the actual life of events and people (p. 25). This is fair enough but he does not articulate a coherent argument in his attempt to do so. Instead, Shigwedha implies that photographs are able to speak; that they are neither inert nor mute. So he reckons that "photographs

act indifferently to the rules of the apartheid' state" (p. 57) – whatever that means. But photographs have no agency in and of themselves. If they can be said to speak, as in the cliché that 'a picture is worth a thousand words', then it is invariably cultural brokers and political elites who mediate a particular meaning of images. It is those with vested interests and a common purpose in constructing a particular narrative that have managed to essentialize and mythicize the meaning of Cassinga. But the stories of Cassinga's primary victims, the survivors, have undoubtedly been marginalized in the process.

Shigwedha makes extensive but arbitrary use of the testimonies of Cassinga survivors. For instance, he frames the entire treatment of the subject by reproducing a lengthy extract from the testimony of a witness of the attack on the camp. He does so without identifying the witness until after the passage of five dense pages of narrative, and then only by way of a reference. The reader is not informed why this passage was chosen, nor why the account commences with this particular testimony (rather than others). It would appear that Shigwedha seeks to establish a core narrative at the outset but such testimony cannot serve as the foundation of the Cassinga story. Witness testimony is notoriously unreliable; it should be cross-checked and verified. Testimony should also be closely investigated. Shigwedha seems to take it at face value as if everything recounted is, *ipso facto*, accurate and truthful. It is merely one version of events that should be weighed up against other witness testimony –

whether oral or written. This uncritical approach is problematical, especially as Shigwedha subjects non-verbal versions of the Cassinga events to scrutiny (as he should). This methodological shortcoming is a fundamental weakness of the book.

Shigwedha shows that most Cassinga survivors whom he interviewed felt that their story had been appropriated for political purposes by SWAPO and that their personal suffering and ongoing trauma had not been properly acknowledged. Moreover, they felt that they deserved unconditional apologies from the perpetrators and some form of redress by way of compensation for having to endure physical injuries and socio-economic deprivation. They had suffered injustices at the hands of both the apartheid regime and of Namibia's ruling party which had promoted reconciliation over justice; they were doubly victimized. Yet, Shigwedha is also willing to acknowledge that the SADF paratroopers, too, were victims of sorts. Most were civilian-soldiers who were called up to perform Operation Reindeer and they, too, would have been affected by the violence and killing. He reckons that the participants are likely to be haunted by the "innocent lives they destroyed in Cassinga" (p. 62). Perpetrator trauma might be a very real experience of 'Cassinga veterans' but it is noteworthy that they have not tried to relativise their responsibility nor assuage their guilt by making recourse to the defence that they were following orders. Apart from Verster, no paratroopers have expressed remorse and most appear to have actually taken pride in their

accomplishments. Indeed, Breytenbach's visit to the site of the mass grave purportedly to pay his respects to all those killed in action (described by Shigwedha in Chapter 7) was not an act of contrition but one of self-affirmation.

Shigwedha's book includes some new material but it is essentially a revised version of his PhD thesis awarded by the University of the Western Cape. It is published as part of the Namibia Studies Series produced by the independent publishing house P. Schlettwein on behalf of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB). It is admirable that the Schlettwein Foundation and the BAB are committed to archiving Namibian records and promoting scholarship dedicated to Namibian history. However, in this instance the author was poorly served by whatever editorial intervention was provided by the publisher. Given that Shigwedha is self-evidently not a native English speaker, the text would have benefitted from more extensive and thorough editing. Unfortunately, it is riddled with grammatical, syntactical and a host of other infelicities of language and expression. One glaring lapse occurs on p. 54 where the author refers to "humanitarian atrocities". Such errors are far too extensive to enumerate. Indeed, the poor presentation and style of Shigwedha's book makes the argument difficult to follow. In these and other respects, it replicates the shortcomings of the original thesis.

At one point, the author states: "The position presented in this chapter [2] that violence is in the knowing of the individual victims of the Cassinga massacre, not in a photograph or other forms of testimony" and this is followed

by words in parenthesis that note that: "it appears this sentence has no meaning" (p. 25). The latter, presumably, is an editorial comment that was not removed from the final version of the text. Actually, this sentence is not nearly as unintelligible as many others that litter the text. But the incomprehensibility of so much of the text detracts from the coherence of the reasoning and renders any attempt to follow its logic frustrating and, ultimately, unrewarding. Although the book is mercifully short, it still required an act of perseverance to stay the course. I cannot honestly say that the meal left me satiated. Actually, I suffered a spot of indigestion.

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