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# MEDIATIONS OF VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

*Fashioning New Futures  
from Contested Pasts*

*Edited by*

*Lidwien Kapteijns*

*Annemiek Richters*

BRILL

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*Cover illustration: Socioterapy setting in Rwanda.*  
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## PREFACE

This book has emerged from the joint residence of all but one of its contributors at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) in the spring of 2008. We are grateful to Wim Blockmans, the NIAS Rector, Jos Hooghuis, head of the division for Research Planning & Communication, and the Scholarship Committee for putting their trust in our proposal. At NIAS we also thank the divisions for Administrative Affairs, Information Services & Support, and Facilities, for providing us with such a stimulating and supportive academic and living environment. A special mention of books, bicycles, lunches, concerts, yoga, and salsa dancing are *de rigueur* in this context.

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This volume shows how those who have experienced violence strive to come to terms with its consequences as well as how intensely political and contested such coming to terms almost always is. We believe that the perspectives it presents will be of interest to students, scholars, and practitioners with a wide range of interests.

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## INTRODUCTION

Lidwien Kapteijns and Annemiek Richters

During the last two decades, the field of African studies has seen a veritable explosion of scholarship dealing with violence. This reflects, of course, more than just an academic trend, for in many areas of Africa extraordinary outbreaks of large-scale state and collective violence have punctuated the continuing structural violence of poverty, lawlessness, and inequality. This volume contributes to this scholarship from a specific perspective, namely through six case-studies of how certain individuals and groups in Kenya, Mozambique, Rwanda, Somalia, and South Africa have engaged with the meanings and consequences of the political violence that has afflicted their societies. In this introduction, we first explain the concept of mediation through which these essays approach the study of violence and reflect on this mode of analysis in relation to the wider Africanist debate about how to study violence. We then give an overview of the chapters and highlight four themes that each chapter, in its own way, engages: memory; social suffering and healing; issues of space, scale and audience, and the performing and refashioning of identities. Our subtitle, “Fashioning New Futures from Contested Pasts”, refers on the one hand to the conflicted nature of the mediations of violent past experiences we study and, on the other hand, to how actively these discursive practices and strategies shape and promote moral repair in the present and future.

### *The concept of mediation*

Mediation, the central common concept around which this book is organised, is a multi-faceted and layered concept that, in the words of Louise Meintjes (2003: 8), refers to “a process that connects and translates disparate worlds, people, imaginations, values, and ideas, whether in its symbolic, social, or technological form”. In this volume, the emphasis lies on the discursive dimensions of mediation, which here takes on three important meanings. First, at the most basic level, we regard the song and poetry texts, biographical and therapeutic interviews, testimonies, group discussions, and electronic interactions



that form the basis for our chapters as mediations in this sense that they constitute subjective representations of, and commentaries upon processes of violence that individuals or groups have experienced or are experiencing. Thus Kapteijns focuses on a particular genre of Somali poetry that is performed in Somali public space and Gunner on a particular young men's genre of acapella singing in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Van Stapele interprets what young men in a Nairobi slum tell her in the context of biographical interviews and Gibson, Igreja, and Richters analyse narratives and testimonies about suffering, resilience, and healing among their respondents in Mozambique, Rwanda and South Africa.

It is perhaps in the kind of African mediation each of us has chosen to study that our disciplinary background is most evident, with Gibson, Igreja and Richters representing medical anthropology, Van Stapele cultural anthropology, Gunner performance and cultural studies, and Kapteijns cultural and social history. Here we realized, perhaps even somewhat to our own surprise, that, theoretically speaking, we needed 'all hands on deck' and had to turn to inter-disciplinary tools and concepts to interpret our 'texts' (broadly construed) in their multi-layered contexts. Thus we found ourselves thinking about the impact of the genres of speech we studied (song and performance, testimony, 'small stories', 'prestigious' versus 'non-prestigious' poetry, proverbial language, and so forth) as well as how their intended audience and the spaces in which they situated themselves amplified or diminished their message. Nevertheless, the nature of our own conceptual tool boxes, interests, and theoretical insights, as well as our choice of relevant scholarship, strongly shaped each of our scholarly contributions. Our own scholarly interpretations, explications, and interventions, then, constitute the second dimension of the concept of mediation that is the axis around which this book turns.

The third dimension of the concept of mediation takes us back to the ways in which our source texts mediate violence. There is nothing passive either about our own scholarly analyses or about the mediations we study. We found the latter to be articulate and emphatic subjective conceptualisations and interpretations of the violent pasts and presents in which they were produced; they unveil or envelop in silence; they include and exclude; they skillfully maneuver between different scales and levels of analysis; they shape the future by addressing the past; in other words, with subtle and indirect or loud and in-your-face interpretations of the violence of the contested past, they actively fash-

ion the meanings of violence in the present and for the future. Most of the mediations are, moreover, strongly gendered – something that is perhaps not surprising when the subject-matter is violence. Because four of the six chapters focus on mediations of violence authored by men, what is gendered male, as well as the implications of such gendering for constructions of femaleness, is an important theme in many of the chapters. In the process of our studies, we also realized that our interlocutors – whether implicitly or explicitly – crafted specific uses for the contested past and often effortlessly connected not only the past, present, and future but also the local, national, and global scales and contexts of the violence they hoped to influence, overcome, reconcile, or heal. Thus they made active claims of citizenship on the state (as in Gibson's, Gunner's, and Richters' chapters); insisted on their own memory-making and the creation of their own memory-fields (as in Gibson's and Kapteijns' chapters); fashioned their own spaces for reconciliation and healing (as in Gibson's, Igreja's, and Richters' chapters), and resisted, adopted, or reconfigured dominant social discourses about morality, religion, ethnicity and the state (as in the chapters by Gibson, Gunner, Kapteijns, and Van Stapele).

This, then, is the third dimension of the concept of mediation that is at the core of this book, namely the ways in which our African interlocutors put their words and acts to work, what they intend their mediations to produce – denouncing certain violent mindsets and acts; coming to terms with having committed violence; personal and group healing; refashioning themselves as men or women; supporting one side in an ongoing conflict; pushing for a particular outcome, and so forth. It would be too simple to equate this meaning exclusively with healing, reconciliation, or even just bridging the distance separating different parties to violence. This dimension of the concept emphasises that mediations are – in Meintjes' words – both conduits and filters, which transfer as well as transform the violence of which they speak, and highlights that they intervene in, and are constitutive of violence in its myriad of meanings and consequences (Meintjes 2003: 8).<sup>1</sup> It is to the concept of violence that we will turn next.

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<sup>1</sup> A fourth aspect of the concept of mediation, that of mediation through the electronic mass media (developed so compellingly, for example, in Meyer & Moors 2006), plays a role in some of the chapters, especially those of Gibson, Gunner, and Kapteijns, but is not a central theme of this book.

*On the study of violence*

The scholarship on violence in Africa has witnessed a spirited debate about what kind of a “representational object” violence constitutes and what kind of methodological approaches violence as subject-matter requires (Donham 2006: 24). Here we want to discuss and position ourselves in relation to two approaches that appear to form the opposite ends of an important spectrum of proposed methodologies – one that emphasises violence as an extraordinary subject matter, requiring extraordinary epistemological approaches (e.g. Donham, Suárez-Orozco, Robben & Nordstrom), and one that regards violence as such a common social condition that an emphasis on its extraordinariness might obscure rather than enlighten (e.g. Lubkemann). Representative of the former approach is Donald Donham, who, in his “Staring at suffering: Violence as a subject”, sees violence indeed as a different kind of representational object because it is characterised by “a kind of excess, an ambivalence of both attraction and repulsion, that does not affect other subjects” (2006: 24). According to Donham, the study of violence therefore demands what he calls an “epistemology of the extraordinary” that reconstructs the complexities of how violence came about by radically and thoroughly contextualising it (ibid.: 28–29).

A similar sense of the distinctive and extraordinary nature of violence as a subject of study is conveyed by Suárez-Orozco and Robben (2000: 7) who point at the unbridgeable gap between theoretical models and scholarly representations of violence and the unfathomable depths of human suffering that constitutes its experience by victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. In their introduction to *Fieldwork under fire: Contemporary studies of violence and survival* (1995), Robben and Nordstrom agree that it is impossible to define violence in any clear-cut, simple fashion, as nothing can stand in for it:

In peeling back the layers of the many realities that impinge on this question of what violence is, we find that even the most horrific acts of aggression do not stand as isolated exemplars of a ‘thing’ called violence but cast ripples that configure lives in the most dramatic of ways, affecting constructs of identity in the present, the hopes and potentialities of the future, and even renditions of the past (ibid.: 5).

Robben and Nordstrom even worry whether violence can (or even should) be represented in writing at all, as to the extent that “violence is ‘resolved’ in narrative...it loses its absurdity and incomprehensi-

bility; paradoxically, the very qualities that we would like to convey” (1995: 12). They nevertheless make a specific proposal for how to approach the study of violence (1995: 9), an approach that complements Donham’s insistence on contextualisation:

Violence is a dimension of living. Attempts to apply equations of rationality or irrationality or to adjudicate violent events as meaningful or meaningless are beside the point because they are based on the misguided assumption that violence should be understood in terms of its function and objective. Violence may be carried out with logical precision, which does not make it reasonable, and is imbued with meaning, even though often emotionally senseless. Our search is not for cause and function but for understanding and reflexivity (ibid.: 9).

In his ethnographic study of Zaire, De Boeck also underlines the need for a new epistemology for studying places that have been racked by violence for many decades when he points at “the incapacity of much of the academic discourse to grasp fully and make visible the changing realities in contemporary Zaire” (De Boeck 1996: 90). According to De Boeck, the standard vocabularies of social scientists can no longer convey the collapse of neat distinctions between local, national, and global levels. Moreover, “terms and concepts such as ‘state’, ‘administration’, ‘government’, ‘governability’, ‘opposition’, ‘democracy’, ‘army’, ‘national budget’, ‘citizenship’, ‘law’, ‘justice’, or even ‘education’ and ‘health care’ no longer seem to apply to the realities usually covered by these terms” (ibid.: 91). To his mind, such terms fail to do justice to how people’s experience on the ground “jeopardizes cohesive cultural systems and threatens cultural identities and habituses (ibid.: 93).<sup>2</sup> The African mediations presented in this volume, however, show that it is not only scholars who find it difficult to let go of “standard vocabularies” that appear to help to order the world; several of the African mediations analysed here struggle against the chaos engendered by violence with precisely the vocabularies of state, citizenship, nation, state, law, and so forth De Boeck criticises. This of course makes his intervention no less compelling; it just shows how hard it is to think

<sup>2</sup> Instead, De Boeck turns to the study of how individuals struggle to exercise “control over a politics of identity as self-representation” that encompasses a range of fields from popular culture to healing and other rituals – precisely the kinds of mediations that are at the center of some of the chapters of this volume. He explains a “new dynamic ‘model’ of interaction” on p. 97.

outside of these categories and how difficult it is to analyse and understand the complexities of a political and socio-economic terrain that is shaped by conditions of sustained violence.

At the other end of the spectrum, Stephen Lubkemann's *Culture in chaos: The anthropology of war as social condition* (2008) presents a very different intervention in the study of violence in Africa. From the vantage point of a province of Mozambique in which war-time displacement and post-conflict return had involved very high ratios of people, Lubkemann argues that the scholarly foregrounding of war violence as of extraordinary and overwhelming significance could obscure (and has obscured) how people actually survive and re-establish their lives in war-zones. War and the violence of war are, in Lubkemann's view, not extraordinary states of exception, but an enduring social condition that must be studied with attention to continuities as well as disruptions. People's older social, economic and political strategies do not become irrelevant during or in the aftermath of violence, even if they are adjusted or transformed. This is also relevant to this book, in which several contributions highlight how such well-established strategies are discursively leveraged to shape the present, whether through the use of particularly authoritative genres of poetry, song, and proverb in the chapters by Gunner, Igreja, and Kapteijns, or by transforming a national discourse of ethnicity in the chapter by Van Stapele.

The chapters of this book represent an approach to the study of violence that does not refute or diminish the approaches outlined above but nevertheless redirect its momentum. When viewed through the lens of particular, subjective, 'insider' perspectives on the meanings of violence,<sup>3</sup> the questions about the ontology and epistemology of violent political conflict in Africa do not disappear but move inside our texts and are subsumed in, or dislodged by the discursive practices of those who, as victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and so forth, were party to the conflict. The texts we study do not provide answers to the specific questions raised in the scholarship mentioned above – the challenges of dealing with a subject-matter so emotionally fraught, so impossible to define and represent, so hard to contain in standard vocabularies,

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<sup>3</sup> With its focus on 'insider' views, this volume contributes to what Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, in their comprehensive anthropology on violence in war and peace, have called "an 'anthropologically informed' field of multidisciplinary violence studies" (2004: 26).

and so disruptive and yet so deeply intertwined with enduring social conditions. However, these texts, constituting mediations of violence in their own right, come to terms with the challenges of representing violence in ways of their own. It is *these* representations of violence that are the center of the case-studies in this book, while the insights from the scholarship outlined above, together with the many other studies on which we, individually or collectively, have drawn, have become a part of our diverse and interdisciplinary analytical tool boxes.

In what follows, we will discuss each chapter in turn and highlight how each of us has engaged with the sophisticated mediations of violence produced by our African interlocutors. After briefly presenting each chapter, we will trace four themes that form connections between our chapters: memory making; social suffering and healing; scale, space, and audience; and the refashioning and performing of identities. These common themes, however, figure quite differently in each of the mediations and cannot begin to do justice to the wide range of subjects and insights of each chapter.

### *The chapters*

The mediation central to the chapter by Kapteijns is Somali poetry about the violence that accompanied the collapse of the Somali state in January 1991. Kapteijns discovered that the poetry Somalis regarded as legitimate poetic renditions of this theme and as conducive to peace and reconciliation was men's poetry, in men's prestigious genres, bringing men's reason and authority to bear on this matter of shared public concern. If this, on the one hand, infused this kind of poetry with a strong moral authority, it on the other hand limited it, causing aporia about who perpetrated what kind of violence against whom, as well as excluding the voices of women. Apart from this male prestige, poets also drew on the emotive power of authoritative memories of the past to present persuasive prescriptions for the future. Drawing on Pierre Nora's concept of *lieu de mémoire*, Kapteijns shows how poetic texts that adopted Mogadishu as a site for memory-making initially (1991) imagined past and future in nationalist terms but gradually (especially after 2003) began to do so in Islamist ones. As this genre of poetry was traditionally effective and emotive speech *par excellence*, mediating violence by leveraging an idealised past against the violent present constitutes an active fashioning of the future. The chapter shows how,

in the context of a new phase of the civil war and the rapidly expanding Somali use of cyberspace, even this authoritative kind of poetry at times loses its lofty self-positioning, descending more openly into barely disguised partisanship and thus becoming as much about taking sides as about making peace.

The chapter by Gunner focuses on Zulu song, namely the genre of the *isicathamiya*, as performed by groups of young men in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal. The socio-political contexts Gunner outlines for this mediation are, on the one hand, the grim past of the apartheid years and, on the other, the political violence between Inkatha and ANC supporters that caused death, destruction, and large-scale rape in the area from the mid-1980s to 1994. This past is a silent backdrop to the *isicathamiya*, as are the bleak and uncertain realities of South Africa's 'new arrangement', the unstable state whose power over life and death is invoked in Foucault's concept of bio-politics. However, the young men whose performances Gunner studies attempt to fashion new selves and imagine new ways of being in this 'New South Africa'. Transforming a genre that, when it emerged in the 1920s, allowed its performers to devise a sophisticated, modern embodiment of manhood that defied and resisted masculinity in the image of apartheid rule, and incorporating echoes of Zulu war songs as well as other South African, African American, and musical genres, the *isicathamiya* performers re-imagine themselves as men and citizens. In their songs, they fashion themselves as moral and modern men – sons, husbands, and fathers – who advocate safe sex and responsible fatherhood, and who, even as they categorically condemn rape, criticise the freedoms South African women have been granted by the constitution. As they mediate the structural violence of poverty, unemployment, and illness, the *isicathamiya* singers appeal to the rights and duties of citizenship, explicitly appealing to the state and its institutions for their rights. Thus the *isicathamiya* songs, as Gunner puts it, disturb memories of past violence, political marginalisation, and poverty as well as older ideas of masculinity and militarism; instead they imagine an active, modern, moral, and glamorous male citizenship for themselves.

Central to the chapter of Van Stapele are the narratives of young men of Mathare Valley, a poor neighbourhood in Nairobi, who were involved in the so-called "ethnic" violence following the Kenyan presidential elections of 2007. Van Stapele analyses how these young men, who before had identified less with nation-wide ethnic labels than with their particular situation as young, poor men in their 'hood' (neighbourhood), came to be the targets, perpetrators, and witnesses of this post-



election violence. In the end, Van Stapele shows, these men also called this violence “ethnic”. However, this label hides more than it reveals, for the young men mediated the violence – that is to say, interpreted it, and positioned themselves and engaged in historical memory-making in relation to it – in terms that were only partly bound up with ethnicity. Though they indeed engaged the dominant discourses about Kikuyu and Luo identities, their more immediate experience of the political violence was closely intertwined with the indirect or structural violence of their situation. This included their identity as men-in-crisis, unable to even properly marry; their economic vulnerabilities; the fierce economic competition between competing gangs, and their specific locations in, and claims to their neighbourhood. The political violence changed their social horizons and anticipated futures and thus affects how they navigate their lives in the aftermath of the post-election violence, including their performance of ethnicity.

The chapter by Igreja focuses on Gorongosa, a district of Sofala province, located in the center of Mozambique. This district was one of the epicenters of the civil war (1976–1992). Civilians actively participated in the fighting and formed the major part of the casualties. Igreja analyses testimonies he gathered in the context of a community intervention study conducted in 1998, paying special attention to the meaning these testimonies hold for their tellers in the socio-cultural context of Gorongosa and the politics of the state. Because there are ongoing disputes about the interpretation of history within the Mozambican government, there have been no government initiatives to help people deal with memories of the past through, for instance, the establishment of a truth commission that might bring what happened in the war zones into the open. War survivors in Gorongosa have had to rely on their own, indigenous resources to come to terms with the memories of violence that keep disturbing processes of recovery on both individual and community levels. The testimony method helped people mediate their memories of violence and suffering by giving them the opportunity to recast those memories in ways that highlight not just their victimisation but also their resilience and creativity in disempowering circumstances. By shifting their subject positions and modes of discourse during the narration of their memories, Igreja’s interlocutors could begin to mediate between past, present and future, and thus to move on in life.

The focus of the chapter by Richters is the Byumba region in northern Rwanda, which shares with the rest of Rwanda a complex history of violence and repression that in 1994 culminated in the genocide. It



describes the suffering among the civilian population caused by war violence (1990–1994), the genocide itself, and ongoing violence in the aftermath. The chapter examines how a community-based sociotherapy programme introduced in Byumba in 2005 contributes to the alleviation of this suffering and analyses how it has affected the wellbeing of individuals and communities. In its current implementation, the programme focuses upon the problems of everyday life people choose to share with each other in small groups, rather than, as in Igreja's chapter, directly engaging painful memories of the past. The chapter compares the way sociotherapy contributes to healing with other interventions that have been organised, at different levels of Rwandan society, to heal the wounds caused by the political violence of the past. The various ways in which the state facilitates and hinders processes of coming to terms with this violence, especially as it engages different group identities, receive special attention. The fact that in Byumba the Tutsi formed a much smaller percentage of the population than elsewhere in Rwanda gives the shortcomings of the policies of the state extra weight and may enhance the importance of the sociotherapy programme there. Sociotherapy helps people regain their humanity and find the moral resources to invest in the future again. The programme thus emerges as a transitional social intervention that may help Rwandan people to reconstruct moral relations after wrongdoing, overcome their victimhood, and contribute to the rebuilding of their communities.

The chapter by Gibson takes us to South Africa, not to a specific location but to male, white former conscripts who fought in a protracted armed conflict on the border between Namibia and Angola (1966–1989). These former conscripts did compulsory service for the South African Defense Force (SADF) and, during the fighting, experienced a range of traumatising events, as perpetrators, victims, and witnesses of violence. However, after the war, their memories of these events long remained largely contained and unexpressed, because the wider national discourse on the political and social meanings attached to this war had shifted dramatically between the time it had been fought and the fall of apartheid. What had been officially extolled as a war of liberation was now condemned as an unjust war. As a consequence, the memories of the veterans remained disarticulated from the dominant, state-sponsored forms of national memory making that emerged in South Africa, including the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. The chapter shows how these veterans have nonetheless begun to slowly find ways to rearticulate their experiences against the grain of