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Elísio Macamo

## Accounting for disaster: Memories of war in Mozambique

### *Abstract*

This paper seeks to understand the notion of disaster through the description and analysis of memories of a civil war in Mozambique. The paper claims that extreme events as such do not constitute disaster. Rather, it is the way in which they disrupt everyday life, understood in the phenomenological sense of a taken for granted world, that may turn them into a disaster. The findings are based on research carried out in Mozambique among war refugees on the periphery of a major town in the south of the country. The interviews are analysed using techniques drawn from conversational analysis to recover the sense in which everyday life is a practical accomplishment of individuals.

### *Keywords*

*Mozambique, disaster, memory, membership categorization devices, everyday life, accounting*

On 4<sup>th</sup> October 1992, a civil war came to an end in Mozambique after peace negotiations brokered by the Italian Christian lay community of Santo Egidio (della Rocca 1997; Hume 1994). It was a terrible war, almost always described in superlatives. An American writer, William Finnegan (1992), considered it the 'harrowing' of the country. Robert Gersony, who wrote a commissioned report for the US State Department, described the main actors, particularly on the rebel side, as 'Africa's Khmer Rouge' (Gersony 1988). A spate of books dwelt at length on the brutal nature of the war, invariably levelling much of the responsibility for it at the rebels (Hall & Young 1997, Magaia 1988, Minter 1994, Vines 1991, 1996). More recently, however, a more distanced outlook on the events has been taken, which places the horrors of the war into a perspective that includes politics, which seemed to be lacking in previous analyses (Geffray 1990, Cabrita 2000, Chan and Venâncio 1998, Cahen 2004).

In the war the then Marxist government of Mozambique, led by FRELIMO<sup>1</sup>, an armed and political movement which from 1964 to 1974 had fought a liberation war against Portugal's colonial rule, was opposed by RENAMO<sup>2</sup>, the Mozambique National Resistance, a rebel army regarded as right-wing oriented at the time, initially supported by Rhodesia's UDI government and later, during white minority rule, by the South African Defence Forces. Estimates indicate that the war, which lasted from 1978 to 1992, claimed the lives of 2 million Mozambicans. This figure does not necessarily reflect the real toll of the war, as it includes deaths from the consequences of natural disasters. During most of the 1980s Southern Africa went through one of the worst droughts in recorded history. It hit Mozambique in a particularly bad way, especially in conjunction with the war, which made it impossible to assist affected people in rural areas.

This paper<sup>3</sup> is based on interviews I carried out in the spring of 2005 among war refugees in the village of Patrice Lumumba, on the periphery of the city of Xai-Xai in southern Mozambique. They sought refuge in the village during the 1980s. After the end of the war, most of them stayed on. My main concern in this paper is methodological. Indeed, I am interested in gaining insights into the notion of disaster through an enquiry into refugees' recollections of their experience of war. In the following I will briefly outline the terms of my methodological approach, but at first I wish to draw the reader's attention to the definition of disaster that ensues from refugee accounts. While disaster can be described in terms of the physical hardship and material vulnerability that it entails for the individuals concerned, it is mostly experienced as the inability of individuals to take their physical and social environment for granted. This insight has two implications for the sociological analysis of disaster.

The first implication is theoretical. The consensus within sociology is that disaster cannot be defined in an essential manner (see Lupton's survey of approaches in Lupton 1994). Rather, it needs to be approached as a residual category of agency. In other words, the much favoured definition of disasters as the collapse of response mechanisms (see Geenen 2003; Wisner et al. 2004) brings into relief the idea that it is not an extreme event as such that causes disaster, but rather the failure of society to respond adequately to it. The main

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1 FRELIMO = *Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*.

2 RENAMO = *Resistência Nacional Moçambicana*.

3 The study from which this paper draws was funded by the German Research Council within the framework of the Humanities Collaborative Research Program 'Local Agency in Africa in the Context of Global Influences' at the University of Bayreuth. I wish to thank the anonymous commentator for taking the time to read through my paper and making highly pertinent critical remarks.

thrust of this approach is to make disasters a sociological phenomenon accountable in terms of how individuals structure their lives. The memories of war reported on in this paper confirm the relevance of this approach, as they document individuals' perception of the nature of their social world and, more substantially, the manner in which they go about restoring their confidence in reality.

The second implication is substantive. There is a tendency in risk sociology (see particularly Bonß 1995, but also Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994) to assume that disaster is inherent to traditional society. In other words, risk sociology distinguishes between risk and hazard, and argues that the former defines modern technological society, whereas the latter describes the condition of uncertainty that non-modern societies live in. According to this view, disasters just happen to people. The anthropologist Gerd Spittler showed in his description of a famine crisis among Tuareg nomads in West Africa (Spittler 1989) that people may not have means of engaging technologically with natural phenomena, but this does not necessarily entail a failure to domesticate the context within which they live. His most important insight was the notion of 'dignity', the preservation of which provided individuals with a powerful social tool to live through the crisis. This is not unlike the memories of war in Mozambique. Indeed, in war situations such as those experienced during the Mozambican civil strife, established normative frameworks were much under strain. Structures of authority and obedience either did not hold any longer or held only under very limited circumstances. Yet, life went on. Documenting the conditions of possibility of life under such circumstances is not only a worthwhile sociological task, but also a timely assault on the problematic assumption that disaster is related to the level of material development.

## Methodology

I interviewed 31 war refugees, most of whom were women (19). To a large extent this reflects a very important fact of the war experience. Men experienced it either as combatants on either side of hostilities or as migrant mine-workers who for most of the war were away in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> All the interviews were carried out in Tsonga and were transcribed by a highly competent

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<sup>4</sup> For the immediate methodological purposes of this paper I did not consider it relevant to dwell on the gender implications of the accounts. For one thing, a much larger sample would have been necessary in order to take proper account of differences in perception, experience and accounting.

native speaker.<sup>5</sup> For the purpose of the discussion in this paper, I randomly selected 14 interviews, the content of which I analysed using the computer programme MaxQdata (version 2) for qualitative research. The methodological approach draws from the notion of 'membership categorization devices' (MCD). This notion stems from ethnomethodology and, in particular, from Harvey Sacks (1974). MCD are the naming references which individuals use in order to account for social reality. In their crudest form MCD comprise so-called 'membership categories', i.e. the personal and non-personal individual elements that make up social reality. Personal membership categories include typical social roles and functions in society, such as father/mother, teacher and politician, as well as, of course, simply named individuals, i.e. John and Mary. Non-personal membership categories, in contrast, refer to objects and states of affairs that act on or are acted upon by individuals in their everyday life. These could be anything from household objects to normative notions, such as charity or hospitality.

Membership categories are central features of reality as perceived by individual members of society. They correspond to the general notion of typifications, which is the subject of extensive treatment by Berger and Luckmann (1991). Membership categories are aggregates of roles and functions sedimented in individual consciousness by the experience of the life-world. As such, they enable individual members of society to make sense of social reality at the same as they go about producing it through the kinds of understanding which they project on them. In the discussion that will shortly follow, we shall see how important the personal and non-personal MCD identified in the accounts of interview partners are for their own ability to document what they experienced, and in that way provide important clues to their take on reality. Apart from MCD there are also 'category collections' (Sacks 1974: 218), i.e. categorization devices, which condense features of social reality into meaningful interaction units. Such is the case with 'standardized relational pairs', i.e. typical interactional dyads like husband-wife, doctor-patient or teacher-pupil. 'Standardized relational pairs' provide individual members of society as well as second degree observers, such as sociologists, useful insights into patterned social behaviour. Now, while the notion of a patterned social behaviour suggests structural constraints upon the interacting individuals, ethnomethodology does not assume that such constraints set unchangeable courses of action. Indeed, just as with personal and non-personal MCD, category collections are resources which individuals use to make the

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5 They were transcribed by Obede Baloi, a sociologist and Protestant minister. Although Tsonga is one of the most widely spoken languages in Mozambique, few native speakers, especially the better educated ones, are able to write in it. Among the educated those more likely to be competent in the language are Protestant ministers, whose churches – mostly offshoots of mission churches – adopted vernaculars as their liturgical languages.

world and their interaction with it accountable. Here, too, we shall see how category collections are brought to bear on accounts of the war experience.

One final feature of MCD is what Sacks (1974: 219) terms 'category predicates'. These are best understood as the active properties of membership categories. One particularly useful instance of them is the so-called category bound activities, i.e. activities whose execution is expected of persons who are associated with certain categories drawn from certain category collections. Category bound activities are useful features in that they allow for the systematic reconstruction of life-worlds on the basis of what different social actors actually do, or do not do, in their everyday life. In the refugee accounts under analysis close attention to these features brings into bold relief the main point of this paper. Indeed, the war context by itself was not necessarily uncertain. It became uncertain as individuals pieced together personal and non-personal MCD, category collections and, more crucially, category bound activities. Wanton brutality, a persistent feature in the refugee accounts, was not necessarily the typical behaviour of some actors. As I hope to show, brutality was not the cause of, but rather the outcome of the type of interaction between groups of actors.

The choice of this approach is warranted by the methodological focus of the paper. The sociological study of disasters implies an engagement with the way in which individuals come to terms with them. Ideally, such a piece of work should be based on participant observation, following Spittler's path-breaking description of the Tuareg famine crisis (Spittler 1989). An obvious problem with a war situation is that participant observation is hardly possible, unless by accident. The question that arises from this is how to get a sense of local agency in the absence of such immediate empirical material. Hermeneutic methods in the social sciences provide a useful answer to this question for several reasons (see Hall 1999). Firstly, most hermeneutic approaches are based on the idea that society is constituted in a communicative manner (Hitzler 1999, Kurt 2004, Lynch 1999). To put it differently, society can be conceptualized as the product of interactions that are based on the understanding that individuals have of others and their environments. Secondly, the sense in which sociology seeks to recover social phenomena is through an understanding of the reasons and motives underlying what individuals do in their everyday life. Approaches that focus on talk offer avenues into everyday reasoning. Thirdly, talk offers not only insights into how people construct their worlds, but it is also a powerful instrument that individuals use to reflect upon their experience. For all of these reasons, the adoption of a methodological approach that would place talk at the centre of the analysis appeared natural to recover a sense of the assumptions underlying individuals' understanding of their life-world. By directing attention to the structural context of talk, MCD seem to me more adequate to analysing accounts of the war experience than conversational analysis in the strict sense.

In line with ethnomethodological assumptions about the nature of social reality, Harvey Sacks suggested three analytical steps which I will also follow. The first one consists in identifying a description in an account. This description is the material on the basis of which the sociologist should seek to make sense of what happened. The second step should then consist in recording the common sense meaning of the description. This task is accomplished by the identifier of the description. Finally, one should ask which MCD made it possible to make sense of the description. The first step has already been made. The interviews which were collected provide the descriptions from which I will draw. The second and third steps are still to be made. It is to the second step that I wish to turn now.

### Common sense meanings of war

Several stories emerge from the accounts of the refugees. They speak of wanton brutality, suffering, flight, insecurity, uncertainty, despair, personal tragedy, poverty, arbitrariness, misery, hospitality, solidarity, hunger, hope and fate. Every account is punctuated by references to several, or all, of these themes. They appear in connection with situations and actors, without necessarily reflecting a conscious attempt by the interviewees to give coherence to their accounts. In fact, nearly all of them just spoke with me apparently unconcerned with sticking to a storyline that would predispose me to seeing their experience in a certain way. In other words, they did not set out to tell me about their suffering, plight or personal tragedy. They basically told me how they came to live in the communal village of Patrice Lumumba. Often, at the end of the conversation, when I asked them for the meaning of what they had just told me, they seemed genuinely taken aback. Here are a few examples:<sup>6</sup>

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6 I use a transcription system largely borrowed from conversational analysis. I indicate my interview partners through the letters of the alphabet in capitals plus a small f or m for female or male, respectively. The transcription seeks to reflect the flow of speech; for this reason I dispense with punctuation signs. I use italics to indicate foreign words (in this case, non-English words). The sign : indicates a stretch in the utterance of a word; the repetition of the sign marks the length of the stretch. Everything between the signs @ indicate laughter in speech. Words between the signs ° indicate that they were uttered in a low voice. Bold indicates loudness. The sign (.) indicates a pause and the number of dots within the brackets indicate the length of the pause.

**Refugees-Hm****Code: Appreciation**

*papayi*<sup>7</sup> I ask myself even now when *titiya*<sup>8</sup> came and said we were wanted I slept with my spirits upset when I try to understand I ask myself why this happened to me my undoing was migrant labour what did my child do this is how I saw it *papayi* I slept with no strength in me can you imagine my own child's blood poured completely on my back and I wondered why how and I said to myself it was the war I didn't blame anyone else for my predicament it was the war I must just live it was the war (..) that is it *papayi*

**Refugees-Gf****Code: Appreciation**

@oh ha@ I don't know what to say my opinion I think if we could rest just like now we are being spared like we are when nothing happens that would be good but merely seeing them<sup>9</sup> is already a problem because they left us in poverty<sup>10</sup> we don't have parents we have nothing we just live

**Refugees-Ef****Code: Appreciation**

it was difficult my son we suffered a lot we suffered a lot we suffered suffering there are people who say that they suffered and there are those who say they suffered I am like them but I suffered I suffered they caught us mostly I suffered from carrying °from carrying° you get somewhere on the way and they slaughter two oxen and then cut up the meat weave mats on which they place the meat and then put everything on top of everything else you are carrying my son (.) your clothes get wet from the blood **he**

The structure of the account was simple and included three basic moments: the start of the war in their village; their experience of the war in the village and the flight. The start of the war is reported as the 'arrival' of the war. This might be related to the word *nyimpi* which is used in Tsonga to describe war. It is in fact a Zulu loan word and describes groups of warriors. The arrival of the war was actually the arrival of RENAMO guerrillas. It is the first encounter with RENAMO fighters. The most common account of this encounter tells

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7 This is a Tsonga loan word from Portuguese and means 'father'; it is a generally employed form of address to male strangers. In this case it was addressed at me as interviewer.

8 *Titiya* is a Tsonga loan word from the Portuguese and means 'aunt', but is also used to refer to older women who are not relatives, but command authority. In this case, the interviewee was referring to the lady at whose home the interviews took place.

9 Reference is to demobilized RENAMO soldiers as well as RENAMO politicians.

10 The original Tsonga word is *usiwana* and has a much wider semantic field than poverty and its suggestion of material deprivation. It means what the interviewee goes on to explain: no relatives, nothing to live on.



of the arrival of *matsanga*<sup>11</sup> at their homestead. They are looking for food and they abduct people to carry the loot. Other accounts talk about fighting between RENAMO and the government army. Still others tell of compulsory resettlement in communal villages near the army barracks. The first encounter will also be the way in which the war is going to be. RENAMO fighters will come again and again. The war is not the fighting between RENAMO and FRELIMO; it is these encounters with RENAMO fighters, the looting, the kidnapping and the exemplary killings. It is a war without any frontline and clear rules of engagement. One knows that the war has 'arrived' not because young men are conscripted and made into soldiers, not even because people and resources are mobilised to defend their country. One knows that the war has 'arrived' because everyday routine is broken; from the first encounter onwards people have to learn to expect more encounters and must therefore integrate the new elements in their daily lives.

This is also how the war is experienced. The encounters with RENAMO fighters structure the day. Normality has ceased. People do not wake up early in the morning to go to their fields and till the soil until mid morning, come back home, heat up food from the previous evening, eat, go back to the fields and get whatever they have grown to take home and cook for the evening, eat their evening meal, sit together for an hour or two before going to sleep in their dwellings. The 'arrival' of the *nyimpi* has changed this routine. Now people do not sleep at home anymore. They sleep in the bush, come back in the morning when they know it is safe to come home. They check whether their houses are still standing – they may have been burnt down by the rebels the previous night. They quickly go to the fields, get whatever they can get to cook, cook it at home, dig holes to hide their most precious belongings and leave the village before sunset. As a female refugee put it:

**Refugees-Ff**

**Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities**

We go in the afternoon and we get there and hoe-hoe-hoe-hoe and all the while you know that now that you are cooking you will eat a bit while listening if you hear anything you cook the food and give it to the children at about 5pm you pack up your things you go to the place which you cleared in order to lie down with your children then rain comes lightening thunder but you are there under the bushes

The importance of this routine can be measured from the following statement from a female refugee reflecting on her current routine in the village of Patrice Lumumba:

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<sup>11</sup> *Matsanga* was the popular word used to describe RENAMO fighters. It is a reference to RENAMO's first leader, André Matsangaíssa.

**Refugees-Ef**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

well now we can relax we can rest because our living conditions are fine you can go to your fields you come back you lie down even if you have pain of some sort the next day you can go to hospital to be healed if you know someone who can know healing plants they can find them for you

The bush becomes the villagers' social space. It has its own rules and norms. Women with small children must find a place to hide away from the rest of the villagers, lest the crying of the children gives them away to the rebels. Anyone who coughs must also find a place away from the rest. Nobody should make noise and everyone should just lie low and hope their hiding place is not found out. Two interview excerpts from a woman and from a man, respectively, document this:

**Refugees-Gf**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

If you have a small child you just stick your breast into its mouth if it is still breast-fed if it is not breast-fed you just give it food but other people hiding with you without children will desert you

**Refugees-Dm**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

If she has a small child she must sleep elsewhere with her child if the child makes noise wherever they are it is their problem because if she gives her the breast and the child doesn't want it that is their problem if they catch them they caught them on their own (..) you see

Sometimes the storyline may change. The rebels may, contrary to normal practice, come during the day. As soon as word goes round that they are on their way, people have to interrupt whatever they are doing. If they were cooking, they have to stop it, pour away the food, put out the fire and try as best as they can to wipe away all vestiges of human life and run for their life.<sup>12</sup> They either run to their hiding place in the bush, to the army barracks if there are any in the vicinity, or to the next village. Sometimes it is much too late. The rebels have already encircled the village. They assemble everyone, kill those known to be or suspected of being officials (party or state), plunder the village and force the villagers to carry the loot. At this point the experience of the war can take a radically different turn. Those who are forced to accom-

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12 There is a widely read book in Mozambique documenting war atrocities. It carries the title *Dumba Nengue*, a Tsonga idiomatic expression meaning literally 'trust your legs'. It can be translated as 'run for your life' (Magaia 1988). Running, *ku tsutsuma*, is the most recurrent word describing what people do during the war. They are always 'running'.

pany the RENAMO fighters may never come back. They walk for days, carrying heavy loads on their heads, always in fear of their lives.

It is a totally new social situation with its rules and norms. There are clear hierarchies; the RENAMO fighters have the say and, most importantly, they can decide over the life and death of those they have kidnapped. Those who are too feeble to withstand the forced march are beaten to death, executed summarily or even left to die. No one can speak on behalf of anyone else and those who break this rule risk losing their life in the most bestial manner.

#### Refugees-Kfm

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

she has a child on her back well they asked her whatever they asked her and then they took the child on her back and hit it against the tree and the child died right there and afterwards they killed her and then they left<sup>13</sup>

Some are lucky enough to be told to return home; others manage to flee. For most, however, abduction is the beginning of a new life.<sup>14</sup>

The experience of the war comes to an end when people decide to leave their village and seek refuge elsewhere, mostly in Xai-Xai. The crucial aspect to bear in mind is what makes people take the decision. The single most important factor is the total unpredictability of the RENAMO fighters. They become unpredictable when they come any time of the day. People are no longer able to keep a semblance of routine by going to the fields, hastily cooking and quickly retiring into the bush. They have become an even easier prey to RENAMO raids. This is the time when people decide to leave. Interestingly enough, not the loss of their cattle, for those who had cattle, nor even the burning down of their houses appears in the accounts as the immediate reason why people decided to leave. The loss of their belongings is built into the account of the routine occasioned by the 'arrival' of the *nyimpi*. It becomes a major explanatory factor in retrospect, once people have found refuge and are reflecting about their experience. Others do not actually take the decision;

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13 This is the story of a kidnapped lady who interceded before the rebels on behalf of a young girl who couldn't walk anymore because of exhaustion.

14 Unfortunately, none of the refugees I spoke with spent any considerable length of time at a RENAMO base. They were either never kidnapped or were allowed to return home or even managed to flee. In the interviews, however, there are references to life on the other side. Young men were basically conscripted into the rebel army; women became the wives of the fighters and the older men and women lived on the outskirts of RENAMO military bases and as soon as the fighters felt that they could be trusted not to try and flee, they were allowed to accompany the fighters on their looting sprees. One interviewee described them as *ku famba vayiva-yiva*, i.e., 'stealing around'.

their flight happens as a matter of course, especially if they happen to have escaped from captivity. Then they just keep running.

These three moments, namely (i) 'arrival' of the *nyimpi*, (ii) new routine and (iii) flight are the elements that come together to produce a coherent account of the experience refugees have gone through. While each individual story may suggest a very specific tale, such as suffering, ordeal, good luck or personal tragedy, there is nothing in the texture of the accounts that would warrant a normatively shared coherent account of the experience of war. Yet this normatively coherent account lurks beneath the narrative surface of the interviews, structures individual ability to remember whatever happened and ultimately provides the clue to the way in which refugees came to terms with uncertainty. I now wish to turn my attention to this normatively coherent account by way of taking the third step in the analytical procedures suggested by Harvey Sacks. In other words, I want to recover the common sense meaning of what the refugees told me by taking a closer look at the MCD which they employed.

### Retrieving social reality

MCD are the resources employed by individuals to account for social action. They contain an indexical relationship with social reality to the extent that they provide markers of the points at which interacting individuals come into contact with social reality as an emergent entity. In the discussion that follows, I will pay attention to these markers and at the same time amass evidence which will allow me to show that the 'war' was not the cause of insecurity. Rather, the war was the outcome of social interaction which ultimately, in a reflexive manner, made the 'war' the cause of insecurity. I will start by discussing the frequency of personal and non-personal MCD as well as point to certain significant collective categories. Then I will document typical category bound activities and relate them to the personal and non-personal categories. Finally, I will draw analytical implications from the empirical observations.

There are basically six personal MCD that structure refugee accounts:<sup>15</sup> RENAMO fighters (50), soldiers (30), FRELIMO (29), people (19), neighbour (8), and commander (7). There are also significant references to family members (father, mother, husband, wife, grandparents, daughter, son, uncle and aunt), but since these are obvious enough I did not think it particularly important to mention them. They are more relevant as far as standardized relational pairs are concerned. Given the nature of the interviews (on the subject

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<sup>15</sup> The number in brackets indicates frequency of references in the transcripts.

of war) and the interviewees themselves (refugees) it is actually not surprising that these particular devices play a prominent role in the accounts. They provide the first indication of the context within which the reported experiences took place. The relatively high frequency of references to violence actors is proof of this. Moreover, the score of RENAMO fighters underlines the centrality of their role in the life-world that refugee accounts seek to make sense of. The warring parties – FRELIMO and RENAMO – can be considered ‘external actors’ who interact with ‘local actors’, i.e. the refugees at the time of the reported occurrences. There are two other actors who are mentioned in the accounts. The first one is the ‘people’ and the second is the ‘neighbour’. These references require some explanation.

The events reported in the interviews refer to experiences lived by the interview partners themselves. As such, they use personal pronouns. References to the ‘people’, however, indicate a perspective different from the one that structures the narrative. In fact, interview partners use an interactional device described by Goffman as ‘footing’, i.e. taking different perspectives in the course of a description. The ‘people’ are the refugees at the time of the reported occurrences seen by the external actors. While the word ‘people’ gained wider currency in Mozambique in the context of FRELIMO’s socialist rhetoric, it is used in the accounts less as a politically-laden notion than as a distancing mechanism to bring into relief the perception of victimhood. The ‘people’ are therefore those who are caught up between two warring factions. The notion describes, in the end, a collective fate, i.e. the fate of those who just happened to be there when the *nyimpi* arrived.

The ‘neighbour’ is also indexical. A somewhat strange aspect of the refugee accounts is the total absence of references to membership categories related to the wider community. In fact, there is no community in the accounts. Kinship is important and there are enough references to that. References to family, however, are just about as far as accounts will go to recover a sense of a wider social context of interaction. The reference to the ‘neighbour’ is already a clear indication that there are more than family members in a village. Furthermore, as we shall see farther down, most people had been compulsorily assembled into communal villages where they lived in spatial proximity to non-family members. The more likely explanation for the absence of community references seems to be suggested by the substantive content of the reference to the ‘neighbour’. Most references to the neighbour are about denunciation. The standard story reports the arrival of RENAMO fighters who are tipped by a ‘neighbour’ about the material possessions of those living next door. Here are two interesting examples:

**Refugees-Hm**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

Here at the neighbour's<sup>16</sup> they are hitting hard and so they say: you should not arrest us don't you want cattle and they said well there at the next homestead

**Refugees-Hm**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

and then they said you are only arresting us but there are migrant workers who have just returned and even my husband sent things through them the day before yesterday there is one migrant worker who returned yesterday the day before yesterday well one of them a lorry just stopped and unloaded huge quantities

There is almost no reference to the 'neighbour' in connection with solidarity and assistance.

Non-personal MCD are also interesting in their own right. The most frequent ones are: homestead/village (50), communal village (21), bush (24), hiding place (9), RENAMO base (14), army barracks (13), firearm (23), dwelling (13), and cattle (16). There are also references to clothing, household utensils, lorries and hens, but these do not appear to be central to the accounts. The main non-personal MCD document the settings where the action took place. Not surprisingly, they refer mainly to the war context and, in particular, to the experience of war. These settings were the home and the communal village, the barracks and the base as well as the bush and the hiding place. One way to characterise these settings is to see them with reference to the agency of refugees at the time of the reported occurrences. The home was their turf *par excellence* before the 'arrival' of the *nyimpi*. After that the home became a transitional space, a place where they could stay only on borrowed time, i.e. as long as the *nyimpi* did not come. Their proper home became the bush/hiding place, where the only external constraints which they had to observe were those ensuing from the need to share space with others facing a similar fate. The communal village was not better than the home. In fact, it represented a double loss of agency. The first loss occurred when the FRELIMO army came to bring them into 'safety'.

**Refugees-Ef**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

they said let's go, let's go to the village, let's go take your mat take your blanket take your mat take your blanket

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16 The interview partner uses the Portuguese word *vizinho*.

The second loss occurred with the arrival of the *nyimpi* at the communal village itself. The rebel base and the army barracks were off limits to the refugees at the time of the reported occurrences, but these were the places of total agency loss. Whereas at home, communal village, bush and hiding place they could still take the initiative on matters concerning their own life, at the army barracks and the rebel base they became mere objects of an external will to power.

Central non-personal MCD also include references to dwellings, firearms and cattle. Dwellings and cattle play an important role in the accounts. The former are ransacked and burnt down, while the latter is slaughtered or herded away to distant rebel bases. Dwellings and cattle are the villagers' livelihood, without them they have lost everything. While never the immediate reason for taking flight, the loss of dwellings and cattle appears to be a good reason in retrospect. The firearm and its sound is the ultimate sign of power. Curiously enough, very few villagers saw people being killed by firearms. Most people are beaten to death with sticks or simply chopped up with axes and bayonets:

**Refugees-Gf**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

they put your child in a mortar and tell you to pound and you do it then they take your child and put it in a cooking pot and they tell you to put it on the hearth you refuse they kill you so that is how it was then they set the houses on fire they did this to two of our houses then they left that is why we run away till we arrived here

Yet the firearm is the main symbol of the power that rules over the lives of the villagers. They speak in awe of the firearm and of the roaring sound it makes as it is set against other combatants. The onomatopoeic impression some of them gave can be ascertained from the following excerpt:

**Refugees-Ef**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

we started hearing behind us *kadum-gitchigitchigitchi ha*

Category collections refer mainly to family relationships. These break down into a few standardized relational pairs: *husband/wife*, *mother/child* and *grandparents/grandchildren*. The forms of interaction into which they engage are wholly determined by the context of war. The husband/wife standardized relational pair is less frequent in the accounts. This is due to the fact that most men are migrant workers spending long stretches of time – up to 18 months – away in South Africa. Characteristically enough, the standard interaction between husband and wife is the discussion over when to flee. Sometimes, the women are unwilling to leave and it is the men who will insist on it through

letters and messages which they give to colleagues and friends going home on leave. A migrant labourer's return home on leave might also precipitate the flight because someone tips off the rebels about the fresh arrival of someone with goods purchased in South Africa. More often than not, however, the decision to leave is taken by the woman. Once in the safe haven of Xai-Xai, husbands will ensure that their wives settle smoothly in the new environment.

The most frequent and significant standardized relational pair is the mother/child one. The experience of the war actually revolves around this relationship. It is the mothers who have to make sure their children have enough to eat, find a hiding place and do not put the lives of other villagers at risk at the hiding place; mothers and their children are kidnapped and mothers lose sight of their daughters taken away to become the wives of rebel fighters. One feels almost like saying that without this standardized relational pair much of the experience of war would be hard to sustain as a coherent narrative. It is an overarching relationship which in the end places the woman (wife, aunt, daughter, mother, grandmother) at the centre of crucial family interactions. A particularly chilling account of this was provided by a mother caught in cross-fire at an army compound under RENAMO attack:

**Refugees-Hm**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

there came a bullet and I turned the child away and the bullet just did *pha* and *wee* past me and hit the child when I turned around to see the child I found that I am bathed in blood the child is not crying anymore and I looked and saw that I lost the child so I left and saw that the bullet shot through the child and ended on the wall and I walked unsteadily and threw myself into the bathtub and slept there

I now turn to a crucial element of the analysis of refugee accounts. Ethnomethodology claims that talk is action.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, through talk individuals produce social reality by reproducing the assumptions which inform their perception of the world. We have seen that categories play an important role in this enterprise to the extent that they document the criteria according to which individuals seek to sustain a sense of social reality. Categories are not enough by themselves. They may indeed tell us a lot about the kinds of typification that individuals make, but the sense in which such typifications are articulated with the experience of the life-world can only be recovered through the qualifications that are made about categories as well as the ascription of activities to such categories. The MCD approach recovers this articulation through what it calls category predicates and category bound ac-

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17 Hester and Eglin (1997) argue that talk is 'culture-in-action'.



tivities. The former are precisely the kinds of normative descriptions made about categories, whereas the latter are simply the activities that are associated with categories. When analysing my data, I paid particular attention to category bound activities in order to elicit these normative descriptions and, in that way, get to the heart of the assumptions that refugees at the time of the reported occurrences were making about their social world.

Six activities dominate refugee accounts: running (37), fleeing (27), killing (26), sleeping in the bush (13), carrying loads (6), and beating (5). They all refer to the war context and, in particular, to the position of the interview partners within that context. I should note in passing that none of the activities recovers any sense of orderly rural life. These are activities that draw attention to an abnormal situation. To put it differently, they do not correspond to the routine world of villagers. Rather, they provide elements for the description of the manner in which villagers sought to re-establish a sense of normality in a world which they could no longer take for granted. The activities listed below draw attention to the position of villagers in relation to external actors. For ease of analysis we could classify the activities according to two basic interactional types: local agency and external constraint. Of course, given the context within which individuals go about their lives this typology can be misleading. In fact, even what I propose to classify as 'local agency' takes place in reaction to external constraints. Still, this typology can be used to distinguish the normative assumptions made about each type of actor.

The activities that fall under 'external constraint' are beating, killing and carrying loads. It is the villagers who are at the receiving end. In other words, external actors inflict them on local actors. The activities define clear power relations, the main function of which appears to be the redefinition of roles. Indeed, the main function of beating, killing and making people carry heavy loads was to construct difference, i.e. to show who the external actors are and who the local actors are. External actors beat, they are not beaten; external actors kill, they are not killed (at least not by villagers); external actors tell others to carry heavy loads, they are not told by anyone to carry them. More than showing wanton brutality, therefore, the category bound activities which interview partners used to document their perception and experience of the social world in which they found themselves were functional to the new definition of roles. The beatings, killings and the carrying of heavy loads did not take place arbitrarily. An almost pedagogical intention could be discerned behind them. Beatings were inflicted using bizarre means precisely for this pedagogical reason:

**Refugees-If**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

they took the hand of a dead person who died long ago and they used it to hit him here

Local agency was reduced to a mere response to external constraint. Villagers ran away, fled and went to sleep in the bush. Their everyday life became a way of coming to terms with the 'arrival' of the *nyimpi*. The ordinary activities which belonged to their everyday routine, such as farming, looking after their cattle and tending to household chores was replaced by the need to respond to the presence of an external, powerful new element in their midst. This element had no discernible face, it made itself present through the arbitrary and brutal nature of his encounter with villagers. Some villagers report that the first time the *nyimpi* 'arrived', they just asked for 'something to add to the sauce'. The villagers understood that they were neither asking, nor did they mean just anything 'to add to the sauce'. This was a request that villagers could not turn down. The firearms of the *nyimpi* made sure that the villagers understood that much. Locally, the things that one adds to the sauce range from cassava, pumpkin and bitter leaves to fish and meat. Fish and meat enjoy a higher status than vegetables. To the villagers it was also clear which should be 'added to the sauce' meant: meat. The villagers had to slaughter their cattle, and what the *nyimpi* could not consume right there would be packed and carried by villagers selected to that end by the *nyimpi*. Interaction with the external actors became, strangely enough, a very pregnant fleeting encounter. Most of it took place without any co-presence at all. One heard them coming, one ran for one's life; one took flight; one slept in the bush. If it were too late and it came to co-presence, then the encounter became an occasion to define the respective positions; the encounter became pedagogically charged.

**Refugees-Jm**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

I don't want to see anything related with this type of person I don't want to see him in my heart I don't want to see *matsanga* he killed my people he just too:k people and to:re them apart tore bellies of pregnant women open and said he wants to see josina<sup>18</sup> and if the baby is male he said it is samora<sup>19</sup> then just left the mother lying on the ground and went to the bush he found a person and killed him then put a stake on the ground and placed the head of the dead person and said it is samora smiling at the people

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18 Josina Machel is a national hero and was the wife of the first Mozambican Head of State, Samora Machel, against whose Marxist politics RENAMO claimed to be fighting.

19 Samora Machel, Mozambique's first Head of State and FRELIMO leader.

**Refugees-Jm**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

my grandmother had her neck chopped they just took her neck and cut it  
my own grandmother who gave birth to my mother I just found her head  
playing on its own her body was also playing on its own

**Refugees-Jm**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

my grandson was a leader with frelimo (.) they chopped off his hand and  
said take it with you to greet samora with but he later died

**Refugees-Kfm**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

They lit up a match and set him on fire eh: he burnt his body the ropes tying  
him gave in so he stood up and tried to walk when he did this they beat him  
beat him up and he fell down so they put straw on his body and he burnt  
even more if he tried to crawl they beat him up until he died now they did  
this because he worked for frelimo he was a local judge<sup>20</sup> that is how my  
father was killed

Brutality became a means of defining the situation and the respective roles to be taken by each party. It became a function of the process of socially constructing the reality of war. In other words, the war could not be reduced to violence; rather, violence became the defining moment of war, the mechanism through which both violence actors, i.e RENAMO rebels and FRELIMO soldiers, and civilians made war accountable. War became much worse than mere violence. It meant the loss of a sense of humanity, as the following interview excerpt documents:

**Refugees-Cf**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

in those days we were like wild beasts do you know wild beasts (.) that is  
how we lived we did not lead the lives of people we lived like wild beasts  
yes we lived like beasts

Life became totally unpredictable and this was, in the end, what turned the whole experience of war into a disaster:

**Refugees-Af**

Code: MCD\category predicates\category bound activities

we were even scared of our own soldiers because if they found you they  
took you to the communal village and they killed you there they asked why  
you run away from them

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20 These were members of the local community with no special training, but with authority in the village.

## Conclusion

In this paper I tried to define disasters as practical accomplishments of interacting individuals. While not denying the essential qualities which disasters may have, I chose a methodological approach which allowed me to identify situations that can be construed as properties of action by individuals. Refugee accounts of war experiences describe worlds of everyday life disrupted by events which resist integration into the routine of everyday life. The war makes its presence felt through arbitrary violence and the violent negotiation of social relationships, yet this experience, by itself, is not enough to justify the description of war as a disaster. In fact, so long as villagers are able to produce new routines and bring a sense of predictability into their lives, the war remains a mere challenge confronting villagers in their attempts at leading normal lives. Disaster strikes when this is no longer possible. The accounts discussed in this paper show this clearly. Indeed, the moment of flight to safer places – such as the Patrice Lumumba village on the periphery of the city of Xai-Xai – is the crucial moment in the local definition of disaster: one takes flight when life becomes unpredictable and there is no way of upholding routine.

Talk is not only action, but also memory in a basic sense. It is through talk that people recover their lived experience – in the phenomenological sense of *Erlebnis* – and, in this way, seek to make sense of their life-world. In doing this, they are not only reporting on their lived experience, but accomplishing the world they live in. It is not surprising, therefore, that my interview partners seemed to be taken aback by my questions concerning the meaning of what they had gone through. This is a question to which they had paid little attention precisely because they take for granted much that structures their everyday lives. The inability to give meaning to what they went through creates disruptions in the accounts and offers sociology insights into the manner in which social reality is a practical accomplishment of interacting individuals.

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### **Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Beitrag versucht, über die Beschreibung und Analyse von Erinnerungen an den Bürgerkrieg in Mosambik zum Verständnis des Begriffs der Katastrophe beizutragen. Nach Ansicht des Autors werden Katastrophen nicht durch Extremereignisse als solche konstituiert. Diese werden erst zu einer Katastrophe durch die Art und Weise, wie sie den gewohnten Verlauf des Alltagslebens – verstanden im phänomenologischen Sinn einer nicht hinterfragten, vertrauten Lebenswelt – zerstören. Die Untersuchungsergebnisse basieren auf Forschungen unter Kriegsflüchtlings in Mosambik, in der Nähe einer Provinzhauptstadt im Süden des Landes. Zur Analyse der Interviews wurden konversationsanalytische Verfahren angewandt; diese erlauben ein Verständnis des Alltags als praktische Errungenschaft von Individuen.

### **Schlüsselwörter**

*Mosambik, Katastrophe, Erinnerung, membership categorization devices, Alltagsleben, accounting*

### **Résumé**

Cet article cherche à comprendre la notion de catastrophe à l'aide de la description et de l'analyse des mémoires de la guerre civile au Mozambique. L'auteur défend l'idée que les catastrophes ne sont pas constituées en soi par des événements extrêmes. Ceux-ci ne deviennent catastrophes que quand ils bouleversent le cours habituel de la vie quotidienne prise dans le sens phénoménologique de monde vécu allant de soi. Les résultats de la recherche se fondent sur des études effectuées auprès des réfugiés de guerre au Mozambique à la périphérie d'une capitale de province dans le sud du pays. Pour interpréter les interviews menées, on a eu recours aux techniques de l'analyse de conversation. Celles-ci permettent de comprendre la vie quotidienne comme une réalisation concrète de l'individu.

### **Mots clés**

*Mozambique, catastrophe, mémoire, instrument pour la catégorisation d'affiliation, la vie quotidienne, comptabilité*

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