

**BASLER  AFRIKA
BIBLIOGRAPHIEN**
Namibia Resource Centre - Southern Africa Library

Gary Baines

(Rhodes University, Grahamstown)

**The Battle *for* Cassinga: Conflicting Narratives and Contested
Meanings**

BAB Working Paper No 2: 2007

ISSN 1422-8769 © The author © Basler Afrika Bibliographien

**Presented at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien
11 December 2007**

**Basler Afrika Bibliographien Klosterberg 23 CH 4051 Basel Switzerland
Tel. + 44 (0)61 228 93 33 Fax + 44 (0)61 228 93 30 Email bab@baslerafrika.ch**

BASLER AFRIKA BIBLIOGRAPHIEN

Namibia Resource Centre - Southern Africa Library

BAB Working Papers

(ISSN No 1422-8769)

The BAB Working Papers are being published since 1995. Recent numbers include:

Working Paper No 4: 2005 *Robbie Aitken*

The Enemy Within, Gradations of Whiteness in German Southwest Africa

Working Paper No 1: 2006 *Giorgio Miescher*

The Ovambo Reserve Otjeru (1911-1938) The Story of an African Community in Central Namibia

Working Paper No 2: 2006 *Ute Dieckmann*

Hai||om zwischen „Buschmannplage“ und San Aktivismus: Koloniale Repräsentationen und postkoloniale Aneignung von Ethnizität im Namibia des 20. Jahrhunderts

Working Paper No 3: 2006 *Lorena Rizzo*

The Elephant Shooting – Inconsistencies of Colonial Law and Indirect Rule in Kaoko (North-Western Namibia) in the 1920s and 1930s

Working Paper No 4: 2006 *Thomas Blaser*

Afrikaner Identity After Nationalism

Working Paper No 5: 2006 *Anette Hoffmann*

Ein unsichtbares Denkmal: Für eine Anerkennung des Monumentcharakters eines Otjiherero Praise Poems (Omutando) für die Old Location in Windhoek

Working Paper No 6: 2006 *Ursula Scheidegger*

Trying to Make Democracy Work. A Case Study of Local Government Reform in Johannesburg

Working Paper No 1: 2007 *Michael Pröpper*

Der ethnographische Forschungsstand zum Kavangogebiet in Nordost Namibia 2006 – eine kommentierte Bibliographie

ORDER (CHF 10.00 each + p&p):

**Basler Afrika Bibliographien Klosterberg 23 CH 4051 Basel Switzerland
Tel. +44 61-228 93 33 Fax +44 61-228 93 30 Email bab@baslerafrika.ch**

The Battle *for* Cassinga: Conflicting Narratives and Contested Meanings

Gary Baines¹

(Rhodes University, Grahamstown)

Introduction

Nearly thirty years ago the name Cassinga (or Kassinga) came to the attention of the world. At the time the name evoked a range of responses, from outrage to grief to the celebration of military bravado. It still does so. And Cassinga will continue to elicit such responses as long as participants and witnesses are alive and the events remain part of living memory. Obviously perpetrators and survivors remember the events of 4 May 1978 differently. Memory is, after all, selective. The recollections of participants and witnesses are framed by personal and political agendas. This much is abundantly clear from the conflicting accounts of the events recalled in cyberspace and the exchanges that take place between parties with a stake in how Cassinga is remembered. Thus a report on the 29th anniversary of Cassinga headlined “Battle of Cassinga still rages” suggested that the events are still shrouded in controversy and that there is no agreement about what transpired in the southern Angolan town.²

The title of this paper reflects my concern with the battle *for* rather than of Cassinga. The choice of preposition is intended to signify the ongoing contestation over the meaning of Cassinga. The name ‘Cassinga’ is a floating signifier (in the Barthesian sense) that attaches itself to a chain of meanings. Meanings are partly determined by other words with which it is associated. So when Cassinga is used in conjunction with ‘battle’ as in the ‘battle of Cassinga’, it suggests an engagement between two armed forces although war had not actually been declared. This phrase is usually employed in accounts that amount to apologia for South African Defence Force (SADF) actions. Other military terms that are frequently used in conjunction with Cassinga include ‘assault’, ‘attack’ and ‘raid’. Such terms imply that Operation Reindeer was a military strike on an enemy base and, as such, an act of warfare. The use of these terms implies no moral judgment of SADF actions because in a war situation it is not always possible to distinguish between civilians and combatants, and civilian casualties are

¹ My thanks to Dag Henrichsen, my host at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB), as well as to the National Research Foundation and the Rhodes University Joint Research Committee for funding the research trip to the BAB. The opinions expressed here are entirely my own but certain arguments have been informed by a seminar discussion at the BAB, 11 December 2007.

² The Star, 19 May 2007 (‘The battle of Cassinga still rages’) http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=13&art_id=vn20070519093038473C345664 (accessed 28 Sept. 2007).

regarded as an unfortunate but unavoidable by-product of military operations – what the Americans euphemistically call ‘collateral damage’. On the other hand, Cassinga is invariably coupled with ‘massacre’ by the South West Africa Peoples’ Organisation (SWAPO) and its supporters. This term implies the purposeful killing of innocent civilians, especially defenceless women and children. As such, it resonates with the atrocities of other wars; with well-known names such as Guernica, Nanking and My Lai.³

This paper will examine the ways in which the events of 4 May 1978 have come to be narrated. Narratives would seem to imply the use of words but frequently employ images to convey their meanings. They are generated in order to explain, rationalise, and define events. In the case of Cassinga, conflicting narratives have been constructed by the SADF apologists and SWAPO supporters. Veterans of the ‘battle’ have a vested interest in preserving the myth that it was a daring exploit without parallel in the annals of South African military history whereas survivors of the ‘massacre’ have adopted SWAPO’s narrative that holds that the deaths of those in the camp was a necessary sacrifice for the making of the new nation of Namibia. Members of these opposing interest groups have attempted to appropriate Cassinga for their own purposes. This contestation over the meaning and memory amounts to a battle *for* Cassinga. The struggle to fix the meaning of Cassinga extends into the (overlapping) arenas of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate. It is what the Americans like to call a ‘culture war’⁴ in which different interpretative communities construe the meaning of the episode from conflicting vantage points.

SADF Apologist Accounts

There is no official history of Cassinga but accounts by Willem Steenkamp amount to a semi-official or SADF-sanctioned chronicle. A former Cape Times military correspondent, sometime national serviceman and citizen force reservist, Steenkamp glamourises the Cassinga story as an exceptional military endeavour.⁵ He is effusive in his praise for the SADF’s military prowess in staging a large-scale operation requiring precise planning, logistics and timing. The point of departure for his versions of Operation Reindeer is to insist that Cassinga

³ I plan to explore the My Lai analogy elsewhere, although it seems to me that a more accurate parallel might be the 1976 Chimoio massacre committed by the Rhodesian Special Air Service and Selous Scouts when they attacked a refugee camp in Mozambique. See *Focus: News Bulletin of the International Aid & Defence Fund*, No. 6 September 1976 (‘Refugees Massacred by Smith’s Troops’). The photograph of a mass grave reproduced on p. 11 bares a remarkable resemblance to the Cassinga massacre images referred to below. Other sources sympathetic to the Smith regime suggest that the attack was the work of the Rhodesian Light Infantry and that they targeted a base of ZANLA guerrillas.

⁴ The classic example is the Enola Gay controversy about which there is a voluminous literature.

⁵ Willem Steenkamp, *Borderstrike! South Africa into Angola* (Durban: Butterworths Publishers, 1983), 15-141.

was a legitimate military target. Steenkamp accepts at face value the Vorster government's claim that Cassinga was a military training base rather than a civilian centre for transient refugees and that, as such, an important HQ from where PLAN commander Dimo Hamaambo planned infiltration routes into Namibia. Writers such as Steenkamp revel in descriptions of the military hardware and the skills of the paratroopers. According to him, the operation achieved pride of place in the annals of SADF military history and restored its reputation after the abortive invasion of Angola in 1975. South African media and white public opinion proclaimed the operation a daring military adventure in which the SADF modus operandi exemplified its far-sighted leadership, discipline and training, and above all the capacity to protect the country from its enemies.

Former SADF personnel tell the Cassinga story as if it were an unqualified success. Major-General Jannie Geldenhuys, then Officer Commanding South West Africa, has referred to Operation Reindeer as a “jewel of military expertise.”⁶ An anonymous entry in Wikipedia displays insider knowledge of SADF planning and obvious familiarity with Operation Reindeer, and it can be safely deduced that this piece is the work of a SADF paratrooper.⁷ It proclaims the result of the Battle of Cassinga a “decisive victory for South Africa”. The outcome is measured by means of a body count in the ratio of 4: over 600. These casualty figures suggest a one-sided/unequal engagement notwithstanding the surprise element – which is overstated because the ground attack took over an hour to materialise following the off-target drop. This version holds that most of casualties were caused by the bombing and strafing of the camp rather than the ground fighting. After landing and regrouping, the paratroopers conducted a ‘mop-up’ operation that included eliminating the spirited resistance posed by PLAN cadres staffing anti-aircraft guns,⁸ and fighting a rearguard action against Cuban-FAPLA reinforcements from Techamutete. The stress on regular military engagements and acknowledgment of the bravery of the SWAPO and Cuban soldiers directs attention away from the civilian casualties. Such accounts effectively efface the loss of civilian life by emphasising that Cassinga was a battle that was waged by two armed forces, for no mention is made of SADF soldiers systematically rounding up and killing all those who had not managed to flee the camp before their arrival.⁹

⁶ Jannie Geldenhuys, *A Generals' Story: from an era of war and peace* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1993), p. 72.

⁷ ‘Battle of Cassinga’, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/battle_of_Cassinga (accessed 18 Sept. 2007).

⁸ Visual and anecdotal evidence suggests that the AA guns were incapacitated by the initial SAAF bombing of the camp and that PLAN cadres never used them against SADF troops on the ground.

⁹ See, for example, Morgan Norval, *Death in the Desert: The Namibian Tragedy* (Washington: Selous Foundation Press, 1983), ch. 13.

British academic Edward George points out that South African paratroopers recall Cassinga as a military action not a massacre and that there has never been any admission of culpability in the wanton murder of women and children.¹⁰ This is not entirely true for at least one SADF soldier has confessed to having to carry out orders to summarily execute wounded survivors of the operation. And at the TRC conscript hearings, a witness confessed to being haunted by the memories of what happened at Cassinga.¹¹ Although he declined to elaborate on what he had witnessed or participated on the fateful day, his statement hints at the unwillingness of the SADF to treat captured cadres and non-combatants as POWs. Former generals insist that they observed the rules of engagement despite not officially being at war with SWAPO and that the SADF's code of conduct was strictly enforced in the ranks. However, South Africa did not ratify the 1977 amendment to the Geneva Protocol that accorded captured 'freedom fighters' the status of POWs. There were undoubtedly abuses such as the torture of those identified as 'terrorists'. Whilst no accusations or reports of the rape and torture by the SADF at Cassinga itself have surfaced,¹² a code of silence undoubtedly prevails amongst these former comrades in arms. These two isolated instances may be interpreted as confessions and may even represent the proverbial tip of the iceberg. But they have not been verified by other sources.

Apologists for the SADF are also to be found amongst conservative historians. Leo Barnard of the History Department at the University of the Free State has published a number of articles on Cassinga.¹³ Barnard is distrustful of SWAPO accounts because they make no mention of military installations such as anti-aircraft guns and trenches, and the presence of SWAPO's armed combatants. He is more inclined to believe SADF accounts that relate the stiff resistance encountered by SADF troops from SWAPO cadres, especially by those manning the AA guns. This, of course, gives credence to the SADF version that they did not simply attack

¹⁰ Edward George, *The Cuban Intervention in Angola, 1965-1991: from Che Guevara to Cuito Cuanavale* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 135.

¹¹ TRC Report, V, 2, p. 44. Lt. Johan Frederich Verster, a member of the SADF's special forces, characterised the attack as "probably the most bloody exercise that we ever launched. We were parachuted into the target. It was a terrible thing. I saw many things that happened there but I don't want to talk about it now because I always start crying. It's damaged my life." This self-pitying statement seeks to transform the perpetrator into a victim.

¹² Prisoners were taken as a result of the simultaneous ground assaults on Chetaquera and Dombondola that comprised part of the three-pronged Operation Reindeer. Many of these prisoners were reportedly subjected to torture and maiming during lengthy incarceration. There were also reports of the bodies of victims being dropped from helicopters. Although removed from camps closer to the Namibian-Angolan border, the so-called 'Kassinga detainees' became a *cause celebre*. See *IDAF Focus* 23 July-August 1978, p. 16 ('Cassinga Raid'), *IDAF Focus* 28, May-June 1980, p. 10 ('Kassinga Detainees'), *IDAF Focus* 29, July-August 1980, p. 8 ('Detainees Visited').

¹³ Leo Barnard, Die Gebeurte by Cassinga, 4 Mei 1978 – 'n Gevallestudie van die Probleme van 'n Militêre Historikus', *Historia* (May 1996), 88-99; 'The Battle of Cassinga, 4 May 1978: A historical reassessment Part 1: The course of the battle and ensuing controversy', *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3 (December 2006),

a refugee camp but encountered trained soldiers who fought bravely in the face of great odds. This reasoning has also been employed to explain why the operation overran its schedule by some hours. But other factors also played a part in prolonging the operation: the paratroopers missed the drop zone and lost at least an hour regrouping, and had to improvise a RV; a rear-guard action was needed to see off Cuban/FAPLA armoured cars and tanks; moreover the helicopters were incapable of evacuating all the paratroopers at once. Barnard is rightly suspicious of Cuban accounts that dismissed their engagement with SADF forces at Cassinga and denied that they had sustained any losses. Piero Gleijeses' recent work has served to confirm that this was indeed the case.¹⁴ But Barnard's defence of the SADF version of Cassinga actually rests on his naïve invocation of 'scientific objectivity'. When he argues that articles such as his own are "based on highly academic reasoning with full reference to the sources used" by practitioners who have conducted years of research on the subject then the reader is supposed to accept that specialist knowledge qualifies them to provide a definitive account of events. And when Barnard asks readers to accept that the "personal experience of people who were involved in the war effort" provides such accounts with the authenticity accorded by first-hand knowledge then they are supposed to accept this formulation at face value. But these assumptions are flawed and have been thoroughly discredited. There is now widespread recognition in the profession that historical knowledge is constructed and that neither expertise nor closeness to the events necessarily guarantees an authoritative account of the past. Barnard's own credibility can be no more vouchsafed than accounts by SWAPO or Cuban narrators.

McGill Alexander is a former paratrooper in the SADF and retired from the SANDF. It is arguable whether his MA thesis amounts to an apology or justification for what he prefers to call the Cassinga 'raid'. His work is the most comprehensive examination of Operation Reindeer to date. While claiming to focus on strategic and tactical aspects of the military operation, he finds it impossible to disengage from the controversy that followed the action. He notes numerous inconsistencies in the standard SWAPO version that was disseminated by the international media. However, his effort to achieve balance is undermined by a failure to locate and interview survivors, as well as an inability to secure the cooperation of SWAPO

131-146; 'The Battle of Cassinga, 4 May 1978: A historical reassessment Part 2: Interviews with two SADF soldiers', *Journal for Contemporary History*, 31, 3 (December 2006), 147-160.

¹⁴ Piero Gleijeses, 'The Massacre of Cassinga',

<http://amadlandawonye.wikispaces.com/The+Massacre+of+Cassinga,+Piero+Gleijeses> (accessed 26 November 2007).

military personnel to answer his queries. On the other hand, Alexander had access to declassified SADF documents that accord him privileged insight into the workings of Military Intelligence and logistical planning of the operation. Yet, he points out certain anomalies in the received version and is occasionally critical of SADF conduct. Consequently, he has been taken to task by at least one participant in the Cassinga drop for casting aspersions on the professionalism and integrity of members of the SADF's elite fighting force. Retired SADF captain, Tommy Lambrechts, has effectively accused Alexander of betraying his fellow parabats.¹⁵ He is taken to task for having broken ranks with the SADF and questioned its version of Cassinga that minimises the killing of civilians. Lambrechts reckons that SWAPO was responsible for using civilians as human shields; an argument that inverts the prime purpose that Cassinga served as a transient refugee camp and had but a token defensive capacity. Many veterans continue to believe that the SADF was somehow above politics and beyond reproach for its conduct. And South Africa's security establishment have clung to the view that the maintenance of white supremacy hinged on an arrogant display of *chutzpah*, as is the case with Israel's military in its wars against the Palestinians and neighbouring Arab nations.

SWAPO and Sympathiser Accounts

SWAPO propaganda made every effort to place the Cassinga massacre on a par with other war crimes or "atrocities". Statements released by SWAPO spokespersons accused the SADF of the "cold-blooded murder of innocent and unarmed refugees"; "of massacring the terror stricken population in cold blood", and so on. The refrain focused on the children, women and the elderly who were victims of the SADF attack. A narrative coalesced around tropes of the innocence and defencelessness of the Cassinga casualties; of martyrs of the Namibian nation in the making.

Validation of the liberation movement's version of the massacre was provided by the visit of international journalists to Cassinga. On 8 May, they were confronted by the horrific sight of the carnage caused by the SADF attack. Two mass graves – one covered up and apparently containing the bodies of 122 children and the other an open trench in which 582 victims were awaiting burial – provided evidence of the scale of the massacre. The party of journalists included Gaetano Pagano who photographed the open mass grave. The images of corpses, some of whom are women, some young, and some wearing civilian clothing are evident to a cur-

¹⁵ Tommy Lambrechts reply to McGill Alexander on Cassinga, 4 June 2007.

sory examination of the photographs. The most widely disseminated photograph [Figure 1] is a black and white print showing the body of a woman in a dress prominently visible in the foreground and lying on top of a pile of bodies.¹⁶ It was widely syndicated and published by newspapers such as *Basler Zeitung* under the caption “Ein Dokument des Grauens”.¹⁷ In June SWAPO issued its eponymous bulletin with the same image appearing on the cover with the byline “Massacre at Kassinga: climax of Pretoria’s all-out campaign against the Namibian resistance”.¹⁸ The picture was included in the Kassinga File, a collection of images compiled by Pagano and Swedish filmmaker Sven Asberg.¹⁹ The file was distributed to the network of agencies and organisations affiliated to the international anti-apartheid movement. These organisations distributed and displayed the images of the mass grave at public exhibitions and in publications. The shot became emblematic of the Cassinga massacre.



Fig. 1 Mass grave, Cassinga (Pagano)

¹⁶ This image appears in Pagiano’s publication *The Kassinga File* but the East German news agency, AND, claimed that it had been taken by one of their photographers. See McGill Alexander, ‘The Cassinga Raid’, p. 170.

¹⁷ BAB, Swapo Papers, 78aSPR2, 16 May 1978.

¹⁸ BAB, Swapo Papers, 78fSLkPb1, Special Bulletin of SWAPO, Lusaka (Luanda?), June 1978.

¹⁹ Published and produced by the International University Exchange Fund (IUEF), an NGO that had provided assistance to Namibian refugees and SWAPO since 1963. See BAB, Swapo Collection, 78aSpb7, *The Kassinga File*.

It was also reproduced on a number of posters commemorating Kassinga Day produced by solidarity organisations such as the International University Exchange Fund (IUEF) and SWAPO's own Department of Information and Publicity. *Figure 2* entitled 'Massacre at Kassinga' must have been produced fairly soon after the events.²⁰ It comprises a montage that foregrounds three colour images presumably of survivors and victims of the massacre. These include the Pagano photograph of the mass grave, overlaid on black and white images reproduced from the SADF magazine *Paratus*. The juxtaposition of the images seems to suggest that the SWAPO version of events represents truth whereas the SADF version amounts to a tissue of lies.

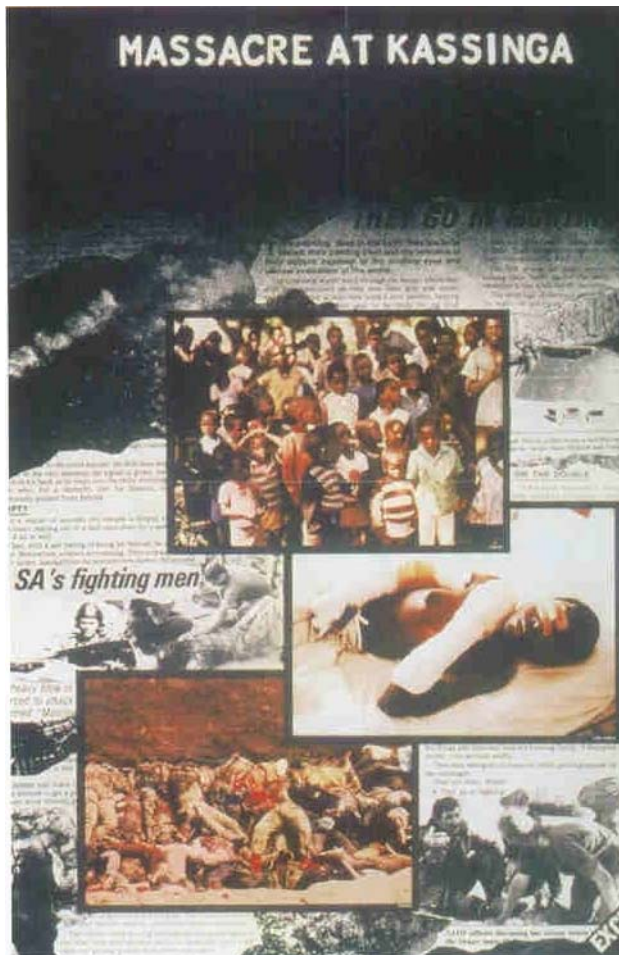


Fig. 2

²⁰ BAB Poster Collection, X 445 'Massacre at Kassinga' which is part of the Kassinga File photographic exhibition dd. 1978.

On the strength of the imagery of Cassinga circulating in the public realm or what he has been able to access in archives, McGill Alexander argues that the available visual evidence does not seem to support the contention that “photographs and videos of the mass graves at Cassinga show almost exclusively corpses of women and children”.²¹ This might be so. But it is hardly the point. For in the propaganda war it is perception rather than reality that matters. And public perceptions of Cassinga were shaped not by the referential but the symbolic value of the mass graves imagery. The graphic nature of the subject matter meant that it resonated with the imagery of mass killing associated with genocides such as the Holocaust. The horrendous sight of a trench or pit full of grotesquely twisted bodies in a state of rigor mortis is reminiscent of the images of death camps such as Belsen and Dachau after their liberation by the Allies in 1945. Images of piles of corpses – whether or not women and children were visible – conjured up atrocities such as My Lai in the public mind. It was arguably this picture that “had a marked effect on public opinion in Western countries” and turned Cassinga into a propaganda coup for SWAPO. And its widespread dissemination demonstrated that Cassinga was synonymous with the murder of innocent victims.

The Cassinga issue has remained sensitive in post-independent Namibia with SWAPO particularly keen on ensuring that its version of events enjoys primacy. A study published in 1994 under the auspices of the Namibian National Archives uses the ostensibly neutral term ‘event’ rather than ‘massacre’ in relation to Cassinga.²² Annemarie Heywood’s language is more restrained in its treatment of the topic than most previous academic publications written by SWAPO sympathisers.²³ She studiously seeks to avoid being regarded as biased or partial by following tried and tested methods of primary research. But her interrogation of extant evidence simply confirms the findings of previous investigations that SWAPO’s version is, for the most part, incontrovertible. What Heywood’s work really lacks, though, is an appreciation of what Cassinga has come to mean for Namibia’s narrative of nationhood; that for SWAPO its symbolism far outweighs the importance of the historical project committed to the quest for the ‘full and sober truth’. The liberation movement is seeking to establish its legitimacy as the government of post-colonial Namibia. Having been accorded recognition as the ‘sole and authentic representative of the Namibian people’ by the UN General Assembly

²¹ McGill Alexander, ‘The Cassinga Raid’, p. 170 note # 832.

²² Annemarie Heywood, *The Cassinga Event: an investigation of the records* (Windhoek: National Archives of Namibia, 1994). Christopher Saunders has criticised Heywood for misinterpreting the significance of the raid for the implementation of a Namibian settlement. See *Southern African Review of Books*, Sept/Oct. 1994.

²³ See, for instance, D. Herbstein & J. Evenson, *The Devils are Among Us: The War for Namibia* (London: Zed, 1989) who are unequivocal in condemning Cassinga as the “bloodiest massacre of the war”.

during the days of the war of national liberation, SWAPO now has to justify its right to rule by appealing to its struggle record.

The SWAPO government in post-independent Namibia has sought to prevent counter-narratives of the Cassinga massacre finding a ready audience. As late as 1995 SWAPO still deemed it necessary to counter what (then President) Sam Nujoma described as the enemy's "disinformation campaign aimed at convincing world public opinion that Cassinga served as PLAN's military headquarters and that the victims were armed combatants".²⁴ This statement appeared in a foreword to a booklet with a cover portrait that shows Nujoma holding a child, purportedly an orphan and one of the survivors of the massacre. Nujoma describes the refugees as a "soft target" and indicts the racist South African colonial army for its indiscriminate killing of women and children. The body of the text was co-authored by a Namibian journalist and a Swedish political scientist, the latter having served on the UNHCR/WHO delegation that had visited the Cassinga site shortly after the attack. The "untold story" of the sub-title presumably refers to the voices of the survivors; to the testimonies of 16 victims of the massacre. Although the booklet's blurb makes much of the fact that the stories are first-hand accounts of the survivors' experiences, they give the impression of being well-rehearsed versions that reiterate certain themes such as the brutality of the SADF soldiers who bayoneted and shot wounded refugees at close range. The survivors are meant to constitute a representative sample of victims similar to John Hersey's *hibakusha* who suffered as a result of the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima. It is noteworthy that they all belong to a generation of political activists who owe their education and job security to SWAPO. Indeed, Cassinga survivors (whose numbers seem to increase with the passage of time) have undergone a subtle shift of roles: from the embodiment of victimhood to sacrifice.

The Controversy Continues

Following independence, SWAPO proclaimed Cassinga Day a public holiday and Namibians were implored to 'Remember Cassinga'. Victims came to epitomise martyrs of the liberation struggle and survivors the sacrifices necessary to build a new nation. Indeed, Cassinga has become part of the founding myth of the Namibian nation. Not much space exists for alternative versions of the Cassinga story in Namibian public discourse as SWAPO exercises extensive sway over the media and – unlike the detainees death in detention camps issue – there are no pressure groups speaking out against an external enemy that ceased to pose a threat. But

outside of the country SWAPO cannot prevent the appropriation of Cassinga for altogether different political purposes. For instance, SADF paratroopers celebrated the accomplishment of the Cassinga raid until 1996 when the ANC government put paid to that practice.²⁵ Although the ANC felt obliged to apologise for the conduct of SANDF soldiers, the South African ruling party does not have quite the same vested interest as SWAPO in establishing a master narrative of the Namibian war of liberation. The solidarity between the (former) liberation movements does not necessarily extend to constructing a shared version of the past.

McGill Alexander reckons that South Africa won the military battle for Cassinga but lost the propaganda war. He laments the way in which the liberation movements have come to exercise a monopoly on the Cassinga story. He holds that:

The victors of the liberation struggle, whose refrain is now the official voice, appear to have triumphed in their version of events. Those who espouse the SADF version are largely seen as discredited adherents of a regime based on lies.²⁶

McGill Alexander's assertion requires some qualification. It is presumably based on the adage that says winners write the history books. In fact, the struggle over who gets to rewrite history is far more complicated than this adage suggests. In southern Africa the armies of the freedom struggles emerged as 'victors' but this has not necessarily meant that the 'vanquished' have been altogether silenced (something attested to by the continuing access that SADF apologists have to the public sphere). In fact, there is no consensus whatsoever about Cassinga in South Africa's collective memory. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission singled out Cassinga as the most controversial external military operation undertaken by the SADF during the period covered by its brief.²⁷ The report condemned Operation Reindeer as a violation of Angolan territorial integrity launched from illegally occupied Namibia and a gross violation of human rights. It added that the raid "violated international humanitarian law on other counts, one of which was the failure to take adequate steps to protect the lives of civilians". But all in all, the report paid relatively little attention to South Africa's war of destabilisation against the frontline states. Government-commissioned histories of the liberation struggle and school textbooks have not paid much attention to this theatre of conflict either. Yet stories of the war (which occasionally include accounts of Cassinga) by combat veterans, retired SADF generals or military aficionados still appear in local publishers catalogues and on bookseller's shelves.

²⁴ Foreword to Mvula ya Nangolo & Tor Sellström, *Kassinga: A Story Untold* (Windhoek: Namibia Book Development Council, 2005), p. vi.

²⁵ *The Star*, 6 June 1996 ('SA to Say Sorry for Celebrating Defence Force Raid').

²⁶ McGill Alexander, 'The Cassinga Raid', p. 5.

There appears to be a ready market for accounts of the 'Border War'.²⁸ For as long as these stories are able to compete with the official Namibian narrative of the war of liberation, the battle for Cassinga will continue.

Conclusion

Thirty years on and the battle *for* the meaning of Cassinga is still being waged. This much is evident from the exchanges in the ether, the controversy generated by commemorations, and the polemics of public discourse. The battle has been complicated by the intersections and intricacies of the political transitions in South Africa and its neighbouring states (especially in Namibia and Angola). Is this battle likely to have a winner and a loser? Will there be a clear-cut outcome in this culture war? Will the winner of this battle determine the manner in which the event is to be narrated? Will the outcome of this battle shape the rhetoric of the dominant culture? Kali Tel holds that if the dominant culture manages to appropriate the story and can codify it in its own terms, the status quo will remain unchanged.²⁹ But this begs the question, what is the dominant culture in post-colonial/conflict southern Africa? Will an answer to this question determine whether Cassinga will be remembered as a massacre rather than a military operation?

Dr Gary Baines
Department of History
Rhodes University
Grahamstown
South Africa
g.baines@ru.ac.za

²⁷ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Vol. 2. p. 46, para.?

²⁸ I have attempted to problematise this term in my introduction to G. Baines & P. Vale (eds.), *Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa's Late Cold War Conflicts* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2008).

²⁹ Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), pp. 7, 18-19.