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# Soldiers, Sacred Waters, and Landscapes: Zimbabwean Soldiers in the Democratic Republic of Congo War (1998–2002)

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Zimbabwean soldiers deployed to the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, 1998–2002) feared death and misfortune, and patrolled the landscape of this war zone largely in terms of terrain they needed to dominate. Yet these soldiers' guns and military tactics were understood to be challenged by spirits which eventually dictated the ways in which they operated. The paper reveals how the spirited landscapes of the war shaped soldiers' beliefs. The central analytical argument of this paper is that soldiers do not always dominate and do violence on the landscapes of war, but rather that spirits and enspirited objects can exert power over soldiers and disrupt their activities and tactics. The central belief conveyed by local Congolese civilians was that soldiers had to establish harmony with the spirits in and of the landscape, thereby creating and perpetuating spiritual authority and belonging in the war context.

KEYWORDS spirituality, war, soldiers, landscape, military tactics

## Introduction

What we know about soldiers deployed or operating in particular military landscapes is that they dominate and do violence on, in, and to those landscapes (see Woodward, 2013). However, less is understood about the ways in which landscapes of deployment themselves invoke particular spiritual subjectivities within soldiers and can thus do violence to them or disrupt military activities. In as much as soldiers are trained to tread in and do violence to war landscapes, I argue from a context that

recognizes that African landscapes are understood to be imbued with spirits which exist in, enliven, and dominate them. These enspirited landscapes thus have the capacity to disrupt military power and soldiers' activities in the course of their wartime duties. This paper focuses on the ways that Zimbabwean soldiers came to make sense of and believed in the sacredness and spirituality of the war landscape of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Spirituality is understood in diverse ways, but for analytical purposes, it is hereby defined as 'subjective experiences of the sacred' (Vaughan, 1991:105). The *sacred things* are things which are set apart and also forbidden (see also Durkheim, 1979). The implications of this article for conceptualizing military landscapes are many. The most important would seem to be the way in which the embodied spiritual context of war transformed soldiers trained in classically 'Western' ways of war-making, resulting in a postcolonial hybridity. The paper reveals that even though Zimbabwean soldiers were trained and believed in the power of their guns, they were challenged by the spirits within the war landscape in which they operated. To survive the grotesque terrain of war, they had to conform to local people's beliefs, that understood for example that spirits were protective, or that snakes in military deployment areas were not to be killed because they were sacred (see Bernard, 2003), or that soldiers were not to bathe or use soap in swamps or rivers because these were the domain of water mermaids and spirits, or that flames of fire could 'move' across the deployment areas at night close to the trenches where soldiers were dug in. The central analytical question of this paper concerns the ways in which soldiers came to accept these local understandings of the landscape in which they were deployed. In particular, the paper interrogates the ways in which soldiers' knowledge about and of being in the war was challenged by an enspirited landscape, a reality which they had never anticipated when first deployed. The paper presents an understanding about war and deployment that rests not only on knowledge of arms and conventional warfare terrain tactics but also has to do with being and living in and within a war landscape permeated with spirits and enspirited objects.

The paper draws from an ethnography of being in war, in a particular context and within traditions characterized with different ways of knowing and recognizing spirits and being enspirited. The author, a Zimbabwean former soldier, was deployed in the DRC war (1998–2002). Other Zimbabwean former soldiers who fought in the DRC war were interviewed, and the author also relied on informal conversations and group socialities with these men. As with autobiographical writing, soldiers' oral accounts provide a particular narrative of what soldiers do in war and what the war does to them (Hynes, 2001). The paper assumes that there is no complete narrative about the war (see also Alexander & McGregor, 2004), not least because many of those who could have told their stories are dead. War stories are characterized by two distinguishing elements which vary inversely with each other: immediacy and reflection (Hynes, 2001). In the former, soldiers coming out of war have a sensory particularity, i.e. they tell of the everyday

events of war such as the details of life in the trenches or on patrol. But in the latter, war stories are not only about what happened but also the meanings of war in those soldiers' narratives, how they were affected and how they were changed. In their stories, soldiers often look back at the soldiering self and see a different person, one who went to war and was changed by it in fundamental ways. As Woodward argues, soldiers' narratives are a lens through which the meaning of being a soldier is articulated and debated. The DRC war changed the ways in which these soldiers thought about war terrain tactics and the reading of the landscape, and the spiritual dimension of the landscapes of deployment was central.

## The DRC war

In August 1998, rebel formations from the DRC, backed by Rwanda and Uganda, waged a war against the legitimate government of President Laurent Kabila. In response, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) deployed troops to support Kabila and his government. This happened because DRC was a SADC member, and as part of fulfilling their mandate, Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia deployed troops to quash the rebels. In the fighting in the DRC, millions of people lost their lives in what has been termed the 'Great War in Africa' or 'Africa's World War' (see Prunier, 2009). Nonetheless SADC forces were often unprepared for the war (Maringira, 2015). In the case of Zimbabwe, this was evident in the ways in which soldiers were deployed without the approval of the parliament. According to Makumbe (2002), Zimbabwean soldiers were deployed overnight without any parliamentary debate or consultation with other government stakeholders. The reason for this was twofold: Zimbabwe does not share the border with the DRC and it was quite clear that none of the government stakeholders, including external donors to the country's budget, would support such a risky deployment. Zimbabwe had no clear national interests in the DRC. Second, the Zimbabwean government and particularly their military intelligence underestimated the strength and power of the rebel formations and their allies. According to Rupiya (2002), SADC forces, and in particular the Zimbabwean soldiers, perceived the rebels as a rag-tag unorganized band of fighters. The Zimbabwean military assumed that the war would be won overnight and that soldiers would quickly be returned home to their barracks (Maringira, 2016). However, Zimbabwean soldiers eventually spent an extended period in the DRC and the war was brutal (Maringira, 2017). The loss of life was on both fronts: the SADC forces, as well as the rebels and their allies, and also included the loss of a great number of civilian lives.

While the Rwandan government noted that it became involved in the DRC for strategic reasons, i.e. to drive out a growing number of Hutu rebels training in the DRC, a closer analysis reveals that Rwanda was also interested in the mineral resources in the Congo, including gold and diamonds (Clark, 2002). In the case of Ugandan participation, Clark (2002) notes that the intervention in the DRC

was reminiscent of America's Vietnam War. Uganda wanted to boost the country's status in the East African region and to emerge as a dominant power after having helped Paul Kagame into power in Rwanda (Clark, 2002). However, the Ugandan intervention in the Congo was a failure: Uganda experienced extensive losses of military personnel and reaped little benefit from it (Clark, 2002). Of the SADC allies, Angola had deployed its troops as part of strategy to counter Jonas Savimbi's UNITA rebels who were believed to be training in the DRC. In addition, the envisaged benefit of extracting mineral resources cannot be dismissed. Namibia's intentions were not clear and it deployed a small number of artillery forces as supporting personnel to the Congolese Armed Forces (FARC). Zimbabwe and Namibia were the only countries which did not share the border with the DRC, but went on to intervene in the Congo. According to Rupiya (2002), Zimbabwean Army generals working in syndicates, partnered with politicians, extracted diamonds mainly from Mbuji-Mayi and timber from the deep forests of Congo. Despite the lack of support for the frontline troops, Army generals and politicians continued the conflict in the DRC to their own individual benefit. When Zimbabwean troops were withdrawn, it was clear that foot soldiers had borne the brunt of war. Zimbabwean soldiers who had been deployed in the DRC told stories of how they lived in the grotesque terrain of conflict and what they encountered in the trenches of war. They also talked about the enspirited snakes and river mermaids which threatened their lives, and how for them the war landscape was understood as enspirited.

### **Encountering the invisible: spirits and snakes in deployment**

Soldiers often depended on reading and understanding the landscape they operated in. In situations where they failed to exert power over and exercise their knowledge concerning the landscape, the military would be under threat. For Ingold (1993: 153), landscape can be seen not as land or nature or the textured and contoured surface, but rather can be understood in qualitative and heterogeneous terms, and can be characterized by what is also unseen. Following this, we can consider how our sensory input will not be sufficient to give us a clear and vivid understanding of a landscape. Landscape owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend time there (Ingold, 1993: 153). In a context where the military landscape is understood to be embedded with spirits, operations are affected by the will of the spirits. By their very nature, spirits are invisible. In this paper, I am interested in the ways in which spirits act and their invisibility within the military landscape. In contexts – particularly in non-Western societies – where landscapes are believed to be and are experienced as sacred, the land can therefore talk, can hear, and can see (Lan, 1985). On being deployed to the DRC, Zimbabwean soldiers carried with them a conventionally trained and British military influenced understanding of the war landscape: the Zimbabwe National Army military training manual is drawn on British military training doctrine. The Zimbabwean soldiers deployed therefore with a very specific and very orthodox set of ideas about how to read the landscape

in order to navigate through it with the objective of locating and defeating the rebels. Yet the DRC landscape of war was somehow different from what the soldiers had professionally imagined or expected. It was an enspirited landscape, a sacred one. Areas where soldiers were deployed did not only have hostile enemies but also spirits to contend with. Soldiers, especially those on night sentry duties, claim to have seen spirits, manifest as flames of fire in the night. As one of the soldiers, Matanda, noted

It was another war, a war in which we were not trained in. Every night I could see a long and twisting flame of fire moving across the deployment. But I could not trigger the gun because that was not the target which I was taught in field craft lessons. What was behind the fire was an invisible target.

The movement of spirits within the landscape of deployment was understood by Zimbabwean soldiers as ‘a war within the war’ as they struggled to make sense of apparitions and visions in a strange and foreboding and uncanny landscape where spirits went to war against them. It was a spiritual war for which the soldiers had not been trained. In addition to seeing flames in the dark, eerie voices in and around the deployment area alarmed soldiers on sentry duty. The voices, for instance, sounded like people in a conversation, but sentries could never find or see the speakers. If the soldiers advanced to the source of the voices, these spectral voices would ‘move’ around or away. Soldiers became convinced that the deployment area was imbued with spirits. In his narrative, Mbishi notes

You could hear some voices in the midnight. You try to pay attention to the voices, you could not make sense of what the voices were saying. I understood the local Congolese language, but you could not understand those voices.

When on sentry duty, some soldiers opened fire and shot towards the source of these uncanny voices in the night. On the following day those soldiers became ill, but their malady could not be diagnosed by the army medics. The soldiers were weak or barely conscious. They later explained that, during the previous night, they had opened fire on weird voices and flames of fire in the deployment area. Eventually a seasoned soldier who had fought in the Zimbabwe liberation struggle took the afflicted men to a nearby village. There the village head reprimanded them and told them not to fight the ‘voices’ and flames of fire, as these were the ‘spirits which also protected the land’. The area of deployment reportedly belonged to these ‘spirits’ who worked to protect the Congolese people and the land itself.

In addition, during this same visit, the village head warned Zimbabwean soldiers not to kill snakes in the deployment area. The village head emphasized that snakes were the spiritual symbols of the land. The village head stated that the snakes in the deployment area had lived there since the ‘birth’ of the land. Even though the soldiers could see the snakes, the spirits which were embedded in the snakes could not be seen. The snakes were therefore both natural and spiritual entities. Killing snakes in the area of deployment was synonymous to killing the ‘protective’

spirits. The soldiers were cautioned against aggressive behaviour towards these snakes spirits, which could retaliate and cause the death of soldiers. Concerned about the sickening of the soldiers who had opened fire on the spirits, the Officer Commanding (OC) briefed soldiers to pay attention to the local community rules and beliefs about how soldiers were to live and operate in the trenches. Yet the ways in which soldiers were told to live with snakes and spirits were not part of the Operation Standing Procedures (OSPs), i.e. the rules and regulations followed by soldiers deployed in war. The soldiers' strategy was to adopt a mode of living with due regard to snakes and spirits, whilst not informing their superior officers at Army headquarters. Snakes could move in and coil up in the trenches and in particular in the bed-rolls of soldiers, sleeping next to them. As advised by the village head, none of the soldiers killed these snakes and no one was ever bitten by them. If a soldier saw a snake inside their sleeping bag, they would laugh it off and say that 'today I have a friendly force with me'. The incorporation of snakes as 'friendly forces' is interesting because it provides us with a vantage point in which we can begin to theorize the military landscape as being imbued with the unfamiliar which in due course was made familiar in the course of war. The spiritualized landscape was instrumentalized: it changed the ways in which soldiers saw and thought about spirits and snakes as potentially protective and benevolent. The kraits, cobras and mambas could take a 'nap' alongside soldiers in the trenches, and as spirits of the land, these snakes were also viewed as having the capacity to 'fight' in the war.

In the deployment area, the snakes would sometimes coil around a rifle, and at dawn would then uncoil themselves. Local Congolese people viewed the snakes, if treated with the necessary respect, as cooperative and understanding of the soldiers' operations on the land. At the same time, soldiers' acceptance of snakes as spirits and as 'friendly' established better relations between themselves and the local Congolese. By observing rules about snakes and spirits soldiers were transformed from mere foreign fighters into local believers in this landscape of war. The soldiers could no longer simply impose their domination on the landscape as they had envisaged at the time of deployment, but rather had to incorporate local understandings and beliefs to live in and operate in the landscape. Thus while it has been argued that the military landscape can be understood as a space in which the imprint of military activities is so dominant and visible (Woodward, 2013), it is essential to understand how in some ways locally embedded spirits live and culturally resist any of the military domination of the land. Ingold (1993) invites us to move beyond the naturalistic understanding of the landscape to a cultural view in which we have an appreciation of the very fact that the landscape is characterized by 'symbolic ordering' and a 'dwelling perspective' (see Ingold, 1993: 152). Following this, whilst we can consider a military landscape as something to read in the manner of a text (Woodward, 2014), we can also understand a military landscape as enspirited and sacred. These beliefs produced effects at both an individual and collective levels. The Zimbabwean soldiers became dwellers in, rather than conquerors of, the landscape of deployment.

## River mermaids as a threat to soldiering

In the context of war, rivers have tactical importance for soldiers. The enemy can be easily ambushed whilst collecting water, bathing, washing, or fishing, for example. Thus for tactical reasons, Zimbabwean soldiers were deployed along the rivers in the DRC. At the time of deployment, neither the commanders nor the soldiers had any experiential knowledge of the deployment area, and this included a lack of knowledge about the rivers.

The village head informed Zimbabwean soldiers that they were not supposed to use soap to wash themselves or their clothes in the river. For Bernard (2003), the banning of soap is quite common, on account of the mermaids or water spirits which were understood as inhabiting water sources. Soap is often scented, and soldiers were told by the village head that mermaids disliked the smell; soldiers who used it while bathing in the river could become the targets of these spirits. Soldiers were also warned not to swim in the rivers, because such actions would anger the water spirits or mermaids. Similarly, Bernard (2003) notes how care was taken to avoid disturbing and or angering the water spirits. For McGuire (2003), spirituality constitutes part of one's embodiment and is expressed through an adherence to certain bodily and spiritual practices. In the DRC, refraining from the use of soap and from swimming, even when days were hot and humid, became a form of embodied respect characterized with fear, not only of and for local culturally informed beliefs but also for the water spirits themselves. These 'abstinences' became a 'ritual' which enabled soldiers to live spiritually within the landscape of the river mermaids.

One Saturday afternoon, however, while soldiers were bathing without using soap, one of the soldiers started to swim and in few minutes he was seen floating motionlessly on the water. The soldiers were unable to retrieve his body, and fearing the anger of the water spirits, they ran to the Officer Commanding who, in turn, called the local village head. The latter went to the river, performed some rituals and subsequently retrieved the body. The village head informed the soldiers that the place where their compatriot had apparently drowned was dangerous because the most powerful mermaid lived there. This death instilled fear in other soldiers. The Officer Commanding ordered that the river would be out of bounds: in future soldiers were instructed to carry water from wells, and to bathe, wash, or shower within the deployment area. On patrols, soldiers avoided rivers. They could not patrol beyond the river for fear of the mermaids. The enspirited river had become an obstacle for the soldiers. While initially the river had been seen as giving them a tactical advantage it subsequently was perceived as a death trap.

However, for the brigade commander and the Commanding Officer (CO): giving orders from the rear, the river was still seen as being of utmost tactical significance and as a strategic position from which to mount ambushes to attack rebels. This was a conundrum for the soldiers themselves: they could not just withdraw from the rivers to deploy elsewhere, but had to continue to carry out patrols as ordered by



the rear command. While the Officer Commanding on the war front took the river spirits seriously, had taken soldiers to the village head and had subsequently recommended that they follow the local 'rules' concerning these spirits, the Commanding Officer and brigade commanders did not see the presence or anger of water spirits or a mermaid as sufficient evidence for a cause for the drowning of a soldier.

Nevertheless the soldiers remained deeply concerned about possible attacks and even death as a result of transgressions that could evoke the anger of river mermaids and felt challenged in their operations, unable to patrol across and beyond rivers. For them the 'waterscape' was itself imbued with the spiritual power of the mermaids which soldiers tried to appease and not to provoke. The idea of respect for and fear of the mermaids included refraining from even disturbing, injuring or killing the messengers of the water such as crabs and frogs; doing so would be a great offence (Bernard, 2003: 150).

As indicated above, the soldiers, despite being from Zimbabwe, were constrained by local spiritual beliefs about the existence of mermaids. These spirit beings controlled the rivers and swamp waters of the military landscape, and in turn, affected the behaviour of soldiers. While the literature on war and military landscapes asserts that soldiers dominate and do violence on the landscape on which they operate (Woodward, 2013), the mermaids' active presence in Congolese rivers reveals to us that soldiers were instead controlled and affected by the spirits in the deployment area. The Zimbabwean soldiers were made to fit into an existing landscape cosmology, that of believing in local 'spirits' of the land and water. But these events could be understood in terms of a local politics of belonging and authority taking place in this particular war zone. By submitting to the village head and their 'sacred' meanings and practices, Zimbabwean soldiers were submitting to existing regimes of belonging and authority because they were newcomers in this landscape. In other words, they submitted to ideas about the spirituality of landscape to create a sense of right, or belonging, or even just to make their presence in the landscape safe in a context of uncertainty, deprivation, danger, and risk. It was a landscape which was difficult enough to even read using the rational knowledge of map reading developed through standard Zimbabwean military training.

### **Map and spiritual landscape reading**

At the centre of military operations is the ability to read and understand a military landscape. Map reading is key. Zimbabwean army patrols were guided by maps in order to locate enemy positions. However, map reading exercises were a challenge. This was not only because with the heavy rains in the DRC it was difficult to locate in the landscapes the features indicated on the map. A tactical position to ambush enemies might be along a river, but because of the understandings of mermaids, rivers were to be feared. In other words, the ground had its own readings and understandings, shaped by understandings of spiritual presences. In the DRC, it was possible to observe soldiers reading a landscape in spiritual terms.

During debriefings, platoon commanders frequently recourse to sand tables, using sand to draw the strategic areas for attacking the enemy and working out the best possible routes and means to do this. For a sand table to be used, it was usual practice to draw it on the ground the previous day. This was not possible in the DRC war because heavy rainfall would wash a sand table away. In addition, the DRC landscape was characterized with thick forest. It was difficult to utilize the map to read and understand the landscape in order to plan patrol routes and even lay an ambush in such a forest. In usual circumstances, soldiers cut down trees which would allow them to focus on the battle axis. However, local people insisted that trees belonged to the ancestors, that spirits lived in those trees, and therefore that soldiers should not cut down the ‘enspirited’ trees for either tactical reasons or for firewood. To do so would enrage the spirits. There were also specific trees in the forest under or upon which the soldiers were not allowed to rest. Furthermore, the enspirited trees spiritualized the entire landscape; it is not just the tree which was scared but the wider landscape too. The bark and leaves, if they fell, would be resistant to dispersal by the wind and were understood as belonging to the land. These trees were said to house the spirits of the forests. The local people emphasized that if the soldiers trespassed on or harmed trees, huge snakes of the forests, the symbols of the spirits, would attack soldiers and cause untreatable wounds.

After seeing a compatriot dying when swimming in the river, encountering many snakes in the trenches and seeing flames of fire in the night or hearing mysterious voices in the dark, the Zimbabwean soldiers were convinced of local beliefs and practices that related to staying safe. The soldiers understood that it was important for soldiers to understand local spirits in the landscape, in trees, rivers, and swamps. This was central in shaping soldiers’ activities within the deployment area.

### **Landscape subjectivities: Spirits, snakes, and mermaids**

Here I want to engage with the enspirited military landscape which was beyond conventional military reading and control. Zimbabwean soldiers were made to believe in the unseen. It should be noted that it is not only the observable and the visible but also the invisible that helps people to frame their everyday lives (Nyamnjoh, 2012). Thus if we are to understand military landscapes, in particular in the context of war in an African setting were beliefs, rituals, and spiritual practices form and frame the basis of social life, then we need to theorize enspirited snakes, river mermaids, and enspirited trees to understand the ways in which soldiers function in those military landscapes. In other words, it is important to note that while the visible material objects of the land such as trees and rivers are considered to be of the utmost significance in understanding the make-up of the land, it is equally imperative to understand how the landscape is imbued with spiritual presences which also shape survival. What is of import about spirits in the landscape is that they do not just live in the abstract, but they live in trees, snakes, and rivers. Without spirits, some

rivers can run dry and trees leaves can wilt. In this regard, spirits can be viewed as the missing non-human element in the landscape (Ingold, 2012: 429). Enspirited snakes which spiritually live in and emerge in soldiers' deployment areas, are in themselves, 'active agents of power and authority' (see Fontein, 2015: 713). The spirits have power over the land in which they live, power over the people inhabiting in the land and everything that endures therein. Spirits make the land, and belief in the spirits equates to the belief in the land. The spirits, then, have the power to spiritually contour the landscape. For Ingold (2010: 134), spiritually inhabited knowledge is centred within the landscape. In the context of soldiers and deployed on military operations, it is important to understand how in different ways local cultural beliefs harnessed the idiom of mermaids or enspirited snakes to mount a powerful resistance to military violence on the landscape (see also Bernard, 2003: 151).

In the example of Zimbabwean soldiers deployed to the DRC, the enspirited snakes and trees as well as river and swamp mermaids did *things* to soldiers: they exerted power on the landscape by obstructing and disrupting soldier's tactics such as ambushes and patrols. The enspirited snakes, trees, and river mermaids were 'materialities of the landscape' (see Fontein, 2015: 12), that is, they give 'life' to the landscape by establishing a relationship between civilians, soldiers and the physical landscape. The snakes and river mermaids were spiritual, they evinced the capacity to intrude and disrupt soldiers' conventional ways of understanding the landscape. The 'active presence' of spirits in the military deployment area actively re-defined the military landscape. There was a co-existence of different beings: the snakes, mermaids, and spirits exerted different forms of power and authority, but all controlled the military landscape. The 'material presence' of the spirits was evocative and sacred and presented as integral to the landscape. This in turn revealed the 'immanence of the past' in the present (Fontein, 2015) and was something that had the capacity to disrupt military power on and over the landscape.

Thus while Woodward (2013) argues that the military do violence to the landscapes on which they operate (which indeed is real), this paper reveals that other materialities of the landscape, such as spirits, rivers, trees, and mermaids, have enduring capacities to disrupt the violence that soldiers seek to do in varying ways and degrees. For Woodward (2014), landscapes are both a text and sites of experience. However, reading the landscape as text reveals to us that there are different subjectivities which interface in landscapes: soldiers and sacred rivers, soldiers and mermaids, soldiers and snakes, and soldiers and tree spirits. The different subjectivities of soldiers and these spirits profoundly shape how the landscape is (re)defined. The experience of being in and on that landscape evince and invokes certain emotional and effective capacities which are spiritual.

### **Prayer warriors: leaving guns behind**

In the war in the DRC, soldiers had to find alternative ways to deal with what they considered as unusual circumstances: threatening bodies of water, mermaids killing

soldiers, snakes representing spirits, enspirited trees that affected the ways in which soldiers could move on and in the landscape. Soldiers revealed that, in war time, they found psycho-therapeutic relief in religion and rituals. It helped them to remain hopeful and enabled them to fill the spiritual void that military life could not deal with, around being at peace and hoping for survival. Although there was no formalized structure and institutionalization of their spirituality, they heeded local beliefs but also prayed, asking God for intervention in the war. Their fears lessened as a result. The soldiers organized church congregations within the deployment areas and prayed for protection against injury and death. My research participants were convinced that they had survived because they were prayerful in the war zone. They had spiritual beliefs and needs that their guns could not cater for. In their time of need they turned to God. One participant, Tawana notes that

We came together on Sundays, prayed and preached the Word. It helped us, my spirit was at peace.

Being ‘at peace’ in war sustained soldiers on the front. Apart from collective praying, a soldier who was at the war front, Chomupande, said sometimes he prayed alone in his trench. He noted, ‘I prayed in my trench, I escaped danger, I could find snakes in my trench but they didn’t bite me’. Prayers gave comfort and made soldiers feel that they were spiritually protected in a hostile context. In his narrative Chomunhikwi states that

On Sundays we were having some church services so others would preach to us, so those encouraging messages which they were preaching to us, sometimes it keeps you motivated, it keeps you moving because there’s a time that actually when you are seated alone you feel like, no, I think the world is closing up to me, because you will be just thinking about the distance of where you are and home. You begin to think that I won’t make it and you hear about some of your comrades who have been engaged in the battle with the enemies and some of them, they are dead, some of them, they are injured. Then you would be thinking but actually, maybe next it will be me. We were not certain what tomorrow will hold for me.

In above excerpt, the emphasis is on what the men do in war. Church services and prayers kept them going and motivated them and were a way to deal with the war. In war, soldiers were caught between hope and despair, life and death. All these represent war: the unexpected happened. It is evident that the existence of snakes, mermaids, and other spirits on the military landscapes made soldiers ‘prayer warriors’. The desire to live and to see another day became an urgent wish for many of these soldiers.

## Conclusion

The paper has revealed that the belief that snakes and other phenomena in the deployment areas were enspirited, and that this challenged conventional soldiering

practices, that of dominating the military landscape. Instead of the soldiers doing violence on the military landscape on which they were deployed, the spirits of the land, water, and trees dominated and dictated soldiers' ways of life and understanding of the landscape. This article contributes to our understanding of war-making, not solely in the conventional and rational terms, but also in ways which were very contextual in terms which understood landscapes as spiritually embodied, and which resisted conventional soldiering practices. Spiritual beliefs changed soldiers' tactics on patrol and ambush. Focusing on spiritual beliefs and the enspirited landscape during operations in the context of war allows us to extend our conceptualization of military landscapes, through arguing for a spiritual dimension to the ways in which they are read and understood. This paper reveals that military landscapes are not only what we see but also what we do not see on these landscapes, and to consider how these ideas interact with and challenge soldiering practices. In a way, when the military landscapes are said to be imbued with the 'spirits' of the land, it invokes the agency of the spirits which establishes the relationship between the soldier and the invisible world.

## Notes on contributor

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