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To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2019.1649908

Published online: 27 Aug 2019.
INTRODUCTION

Spirituality and War: Soldier Practices in Deployment in African Military Landscapes

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This special issue is about spirituality and war, and specifically the ways in which soldiers engage with spiritual ideas, beliefs and practices within the context of military deployments. The geographical focus of the five papers is sub-Saharan Africa. The five papers included in this special issue all engage with these ideas and this context.

The impetus for this special issue came from two sources. The first was an observation about the limits of conventional analytic approaches to military landscapes, which emphasize an idea of landscape as a text to be read. Although this conceptualization has proved fruitful in a range of analytic contexts for opening up the idea of landscape as constituted, expressed and read through military practices (Woodward, 2014), this approach is limited in the extent to which it engages with soldiers’ own responses to the spaces and places of their deployments. To be sure, inquiries into soldiers’ engagements with landscape have elicited some scholarly interest over the years from analysts seeking to understand military personnel’s perspectives on the geographies of deployment (Hockey, 1986; Woodward, 2004; King, 2013). Yet spirituality, which we define around a sense of connection with something beyond the materiality of the physical world and the relationships which are experienced within it, has not figured to any great extent within this body of existing work. Furthermore, the emphasis in most existing work on military landscapes is on the visible; as the papers in this special issue show, the invisible and non-tangible are just as much features of landscape as that which can be clearly seen in material form. These tendencies result from the dominance of Western scholarly epistemologies which privilege visual, textual and material rationalities and the empirical
focus on Western military landscapes in existing scholarship. Equally, whereas there is a tradition of existing scholarship which explores spirituality as religiosity and its roles in motivating and sustaining individual personnel’s engagements in armed conflict, the focus in such work has been almost exclusively on organized religion, often with a focus at state level (see Blin, 2019 for an overview). Yet as the papers in this edited collection indicate very clearly, it is at the level of the individual and their lived experience that we see the clear importance of spiritual beliefs in shaping how military personnel deploy. On this question, existing scholarship on military landscapes has been silent, and this was a motivating factor in the development of this special issue.

The second impetus for this special issue was a recognition of the need to explore what consideration of the African military context might bring to on-going academic debates about military landscapes in particular, and about war and culture more generally, which have taken place primarily in European and North American academic contexts. The special issue developed from a symposium organized by the lead special issue editor, Dr Godfrey Maringira, at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, in December 2016. Papers engaging with sub-Saharan African contexts indicated to us how the inclusion of ideas informed by different conflicts and modes of military activity, by a range of contexts for both military recruitment and for the deployment of military forces, and by a variety of organizational and training formats, could helpfully expand our collective understanding of military landscapes. Highly significant too was the contribution of conceptual approaches that drew upon post-colonial theory, and what these might do both to expand and unsettle existing orthodoxies. The question of spirituality and its role in the war as a factor shaping the practicalities of soldiering was one raised in our symposium and ultimately provided the thread drawing together the papers in this special issue. More broadly, we are pleased to be able to bring to the readers of the Journal of War and Culture Studies research by African scholars about the African context, as a means of expanding our collective understanding of the myriad relationships between war and culture.

In this special issue, landscape is understood as having spiritual agency — although how that plays out through lived experience and the interpretation of this varies across the five papers. Underpinning each lies the intention to look at military deployments as the product not just of technical knowledge about weaponry, or the realization across the terrain of tactics developed through military operational procedures, but also as the product of knowledge about landscapes. Furthermore, this knowledge comprises not only an understanding of physical features as the site of strategic operations, but also of the landscape’s spiritual dimension and potential. Sources of knowledge include tacit understandings amongst military organizations about the significance of spiritual belief, the knowledge of local civilians, and soldiers’ own understanding of locally specific beliefs in the spiritual capacities of landscapes. In short, the papers show how understanding a landscape’s spiritual dimensions is integral to military operations. The armed conflicts under
discussion are conducted by military personnel not only through physical activities in material space, but also through belief systems, spiritual understanding, and associated practices.

We begin with Godfrey Maringira’s examination of the experiences of Zimbabwean soldiers deployed to the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between 1998 and 2002. Although these soldiers were fully trained and trusted the capabilities of their weapons, on deployment they were challenged by the idea of spirits within the landscape in which they operated. In essence, they viewed their survival as a consequence of their conforming to local people’s spiritual beliefs. Through interviews with former soldiers, Maringira shows how they developed an understanding that, for example, spirits were protective, or that snakes in military deployment areas were not to be killed because they were sacred, or that soldiers should avoid bathing or using soap in swamps and rivers because these were the domain of water mermaids and spirits. Maringira’s central analytical question 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 war and their experience of this particular war was challenged by landscape alive with spirits, something they had not anticipated when first deployed. The paper argues that understanding armed conflict rests not only with knowledge of arms and conventional tactics, but also with the ideas of war landscapes as permeated with spirits and objects possessed by spirits.

Edmore Chitkutuku’s paper looks to the recent past, and to the war of liberation in Zimbabwe culminating in independence in 1980, to examine how Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) guerrillas mobilized their spiritual beliefs in the 1970s liberation war against the colonial Rhodesian rule. This paper challenges the dominant Western conceptualization of military landscapes as passive sites to be understood only in terms of their domination and shaping by military activities. Chitukutuku suggests an alternative conceptualization alert to the spirituality of landscape, and which sees the landscape as active and affective beyond the dictates of human action. The paper examines how this understanding shaped the military engagements of guerrillas, with spiritual beliefs influencing the guerrillas’ engagements with wild animals and with the materiality of the landscape’s mountains, caves, rivers, trees and soil. The paper also asks how these spiritual beliefs became instrumental in shaping military activities, drawing on ethnographic work with former guerrillas to do so.

Alice Wabule and Joram Tarusarira’s paper explores the spiritual experiences of Ugandan soldiers deployed to the wars in the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan. Drawing on interviews with former Ugandan soldiers, the paper examines their understanding that their survival of that war was a consequence of their spiritual beliefs in God or other transcendent beings, rather than as a consequence of their military power or knowledge. On deployment, the soldiers endured great hardships in unfamiliar terrain, and they explained their survival in
terms of the power of a transcendent being which was interpreted as protective in situations of great peril. Wabule and Tarusarira locate the experiences of these Ugandan soldiers within a wider context of religion and spirituality in sub-Saharan Africa, and they argue for a fuller understanding of the spiritual dimension when seeking to understand contemporary African military experiences. This includes exploration of beliefs in transcendent powers and the promises of spiritual belief in ensuring survival in armed conflict.

Dries Velthuizen’s paper looks at the spiritual knowledge of !Kun and Kwe (San) soldiers deployed in Namibia and Angola during the Cold War. Drawing on Velthuizen’s experience of operational command, the paper discusses the spiritual practices that constituted an important part of these soldiers’ professional knowledge. Spiritual practices were significant to understanding the complexity and uncertainty of the military landscapes in which they operated. Velthuizen discusses the cosmology and associated spiritual practices of the !Kun people, and explains how these spiritual practices informed the ways in which the military landscape was read by these soldiers. He argues for the need to include an understanding of the ways in which an awareness of terrain and intelligence on enemy activities can be underpinned by spiritual beliefs about the landscape. For the !Kun soldiers, this in turn shaped their military responses and operational practices, including their self-definition as soldiers.

Diana Gibson’s paper takes a phenomenological approach to the question of landscape and spiritual engagement, exploring the experiences of San trackers deployed within a South African Defence Force (SADF) Battalion during the war on the border between Namibia and Angola prior to Namibian independence. These soldiers were recruited to assist with the tracking of insurgents through the arid landscapes of the border region. Drawing on interviews with former trackers or spoorsnyers, Gibson explains how they drew on their experiential and embodied engagements with the landscape, using visual, olfactory, auditory, tactile and atmospheric information. The lived experiences of the San trackers draw on an interplay of historical and cultural information, soldierly habitus, somatic modes of attention and bodily dispositions.

The research agenda suggested by this special issue, looking forward, is of exploration and understanding of landscapes of military activities as lived, experienced and constitutive of practice through both material and non-material, visible and invisible means (see also Chitukutuku & Maringira, 2019). It also indicates, through its examination of the interfaces between spirituality, war, soldiers and landscape, the contributions to be made by Afrocentric and non-Western conceptualizations of place and conflict to our understanding of the co-constitution of war and culture.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the Volkswagen Foundation Fellowship (2015–2021).
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Sarah Bulmer work in the field of Critical Military Studies and International Relations. The work explores critical theories of subjectivity and the implication of these for thinking about military identity, the legacies of contemporary conflict and processes of militarisation. The work is interdisciplinary, engaging with political geography, queer theory, sociology and history.

References


