

**A Mozambique News Agency Feature**

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Bandits and religion

by Gil Lauriciano

When an American journalist asked Joao Pedro Nlapa what he considered the difference "between Frelimo and Renamo", he first gazed at a small picture of "Our Lady of Fatima" on the wall of his hut, and then asked us to join him in prayer "in memory of our catholic brothers who died here in Gile".

Gile is a town in the central Mozambican province of Zambezia that was in the hands of the South African backed MNR bandits for about two years. It was retaken by the Mozambican armed forces on 10 July 1988.

Mr Nlapa tried to answer the American's question. "Do you know this Renamo you are speaking about?", he asked. "Just think that in less than two years they managed to take us back to the stone age. Out there in the bush we were lighting fires by rubbing stones or sticks together. We were wearing bits of tree bark instead of clothes, and people were dying like animals".

Mr Nlapa is one of 38,000 people rescued from bandit captivity by the army's July operation. He is a local "coordinator" (a lay official) in the Roman Catholic church. When we met him, before he invited us into his hut, Mr Nlapa was directing his fellow believers in the building of a church, using local wood, thatch and mud bricks as their materials.

At the end of our meeting, he asked us to try and contact the local Catholic bishop in the provincial capital, Quelimane, and "ask him to do what the government is doing, because we have nothing. At least he should send us the medicines and other things we mentioned in the letter we sent him".

Mr Nlapa told us how, in 1985, shortly before the first bandit attack on Gile, the Catholic priests in the town organised a meeting with their congregation. They told them that they had to leave Gile on the orders of the bishop. The priests were foreign citizens (Italians and Portuguese). Since, on Vatican figures, there are only 41 ordained Mozambican priests, the Catholic church in Mozambique is highly dependent on missionaries.

The priests asked the faithful "to continue praying to God", and appointed Joao Nlapa and two others as "coordinators".

In October 1986, when the bandits occupied Gile, they did not destroy the church, and instead invited the townspeople to carry on with their prayers. But this apparent freedom only lasted until the bandits had consumed all the goods they found in the Gile shops.

Before attacking the building itself, the bandits began to ambush believers on their way to church. Traditionally, Catholics attending church wear their best clothes: the bandits would order them to take off these clothes and hand them over. At the same time, MNR gangs looted nearby villages, and raped young girls in front of their parents.

Eye-witnesses told AIM that on several occasions the bandits interrupted religious services in order to recruit young Catholics - some for military training, and others as porters, forced to carry stolen goods to distant MNR bases.

"I left the church to go and hide in the bush two months after they (the bandits) arrived here", said Mr Nlapa. "They had already broken many things in the church, and most of the congregation, those who had saved themselves, had already fled".

"These pictures of Our Lady of Fatima, and this book (a small bible) are the only things I managed to save", he added.

This sort of relationship between the bandits and organised religion is almost generalised - whether the religion in question be Catholic, Methodist, Muslim or any other.

Ernesto Massambo, a Mozambican who escaped from bandit captivity, told AIM of an incident whereby a pastor of the Assemblies of God was sentenced to death by a local bandit chief because he refused to speak of the MNR in his services.

The bandits had kidnapped this pastor in Marromeu in Sofala province, and had then taken him across the Zambezi river to an MNR base near the town of Luabo. "They brought him to the Nhathinde base in 1986", said Mr Massambo, "and told the people there 'we've brought a pastor to organise the church'".

But the pastor asked believers to pray for an end to the war. The local MNR chief, known as Gatao, did not like this at all. The pastor was arrested and tied up for two days. Gatao then ordered his execution: but before his orders could be carried out the pastor had mysteriously disappeared. Mr Massambo believes that the local people rescued him and helped him escape.

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One factor that prevents the MNR from enjoying a good relation with churches, even for purely propaganda purposes, is the superstition that reigns inside the organisation. In their bases the bandit chiefs live side by side with "feiticeiros" (witch-doctors) who claim to use supernatural means to guarantee the MNR success in its raids.

A former bandit, 18 year old Joao Fabiao, told AIM of a female witch-doctor named Maria Nhabele in his base who supervised religious ceremonies every time a group of bandits departed on a mission.

"They say that our struggle is for the spirits", said Mr Fabiao. "So when we left on missions the witch-doctor carried out a ceremony with a goat. She mixed the goat's blood with medicines and gave it to us to drink. She said 'it's so you don't die when you meet the massotcha (soldiers)'".

According to Mr Fabiao, the witch-doctors promote cannibalism. His story is backed up by an increasing number of stories of cannibalism told over the last two years by people fleeing from bandit control.

"Maria Nhabele recommended to the commanders that they bring her the inner organs of new-born children so that she could make drugs for them", said Mr Fabiao. "Or she would order us to drink the blood of people before going into combat".

Bandits killed by the Mozambican army have sometimes been found wearing fetishes or other items associated with witchcraft. These have included human bones.

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