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Arielle Wright

Introduction

South African society continues to struggle with the legacy of violence from its Apartheid past. Throughout the 1970s until the last days of Apartheid in the 1990s, the subculture of African youth became increasingly militant in the struggle against Apartheid oppression. Since then, South Africans have discovered that they cannot reverse these patterns of violent behaviour simply with the institution of democratic rule. This paper will establish a link between the violence in youth culture during the anti-Apartheid resistance and the contemporary expression of violence among African youth, which includes widespread crime and sexual violence.

The initial analysis of this link starts with an examination of the purpose and legitimization of the use of violence by political groups during Apartheid. The focus will center on the generation of African youth at the forefront of political action; the “comrades” of the mass democratic movement. In the final years of Apartheid, these youth participated in intense warfare against other African political factions. This escalation of violent behaviour shaped collective attitudes about the use of violence and influenced cultural norms around the expression of masculinity. When Apartheid ended, the social and psychological stresses caused by the massive shifts in South African society interacted with existing patterns of violence to reinforce its symbolic association with masculinity. This has led to a rise in the violent crime rate and incidents of sexual assault within contemporary Black communities.

The Context of Apartheid Rule

The Apartheid state was created when the Afrikaner National Party came to power in the 1948 election. Laws quickly banned interracial sex or marriage, created racial categories for all citizens, and enforced residential segregation (Furlong 2001:385). The National Party used native land reserves, created by the 1913 British Land Act, as “homelands” (called Bantustans) to which Blacks were forcibly removed (Seidman 1999:422). Blacks commuted between their townships and their jobs as miners or labourers in “White” cities, where they often had to live in single-sex barracks for most of the year (Furlong 2001:385). The Bantustans created a circulatory migrant system that provided White businessmen with a reliable supply of cheap Black labour for their farms, mines and factories (Seidman 1999:422). This system was further reinforced and protected by the Pass Laws of 1952, which required Blacks to carry racial identification documents at all times (Furlong, 2001:385). The creation of racial homelands to segregate South Africa’s Black population and the associated pattern of migratory labour had unforeseen political consequences and fueled the formation of the different factions involved in the violence that characterized the anti-Apartheid struggle.

The Legitimization of Violence as a Political Tool

Social scientists in South Africa have proposed that the continuing violence among Blacks is a consequence of the systematic use of violence and terror by the colonial state (Beinart 1992:455). State violence was an expression of political power that allowed white settlers to regularly use savage beatings to assert their authority over Black Africans.
(ibid:461). The state also used premeditated terror and exemplary killing to keep subjects in line and enforce public policy. Colonial discipline was especially brutal due to the dehumanization of African subjects and the difficulty in controlling the excesses of state agents (ibid:462).

Violence was infused into the very structures of the Apartheid state through the denial of basic human rights and opportunities to Blacks (Beinart 1992:456). Africans experienced systematic violence in many manifestations, including state brutality and racist laws. The experience of violence in the daily lives of Blacks led to the understanding that violence was the only means of communication between the state and its citizens.

As part of their “Mass Democratic” movement, the African National Congress (ANC) Party adopted guerilla tactics in the 1960s with the Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) militant group (Furlong 2001:387). This approach was specifically due to the consensus that the South African state was unresponsive to peaceful protest methods (Beinart 1992:460). All members of the party agreed that political mobilization would be best accomplished through armed resistance (ibid:464). For many of these early activists, violence was viewed as a distasteful but necessary action that could succeed were peaceful negotiations had failed.

Younger advocates of the Mass Democratic movement spearheaded by the ANC embraced violence with fewer ideological conflicts (Beinart 1992:465). These young men regularly faced the brutality of police and many witnessed peers their own age gunned down in the Soweto uprising of 1976 (ibid:465). Their outrage was channeled into civic organizations in the townships committed to liberation from White oppression. The spread of the youth movement among townships was facilitated by the large number of youth on the street, whether unemployed or in school (Sitas 1992:633).

Members called themselves “comrades” and shared the goal of mobilizing all Blacks in a “general strike.” The strike entailed a complete boycott in which Black laborers would refuse to work in order to topple the Apartheid regime (Sitas 1992:640). In pursuit of this goal, the youth organized massive marches and consumer or rent boycotts. These youth turned to violence as the most effective method of ensuring compliance with their protests. The “comrades” legitimized their use of violence by viewing it as less brutal than that of the army or state (Chabedi 2003:363). It became dangerous to question their tactics for fear of being labeled an “informer,” since perceived betrayal was met with swift retribution. Punishment included such horrific acts as “necklacing,” in which tires filled with gas were placed around a person’s neck and set on fire (ibid:362). Those found to have broken consumer boycotts were sometimes forced to consume the goods they had purchased, which sometimes included soap or detergent (Maake 1992:599).

“Comrades” claimed their use of violence was defensive in that it targeted the system. Increasing social fractures, however, led to attacks against marginalized groups within the community during eruptions of collective anger (Beinart 1992:483). The ANC admitted much later that some of the comrade “self-defense” units had been beyond Congress control (Heribert and Moodley 1992:496). Some groups were guilty of fighting among themselves, necklacing individuals on questionable
charges and imposing their own “taxes” on black businessmen (ibid:496).

During this time, the South African police formed a partnership with ANC’s political rival the Inkatha Freedom Party, and the migrant labourers who supported Inkatha. Together these parties formed vigilant associations that aimed to crush the youth movement. Public spaces became war zones as divisions deepened between the younger politicized township residents and the elder migrant labourers in nearby hostels. A cycle of combat developed in which members of one group invaded the opposite territory to ambush their enemies before quickly withdrawing. Both sides were drawn into a spiraling cycle of retaliation (Chabedi 2003:364).

The use of violence against the “comrades” increased and normalized their own capacity for cruelty. Training to become a “comrade” emphasized an aggressive expression of masculinity; those who did not conform were labeled “girls” or “sissies” (Beinart 1992:483). This approach facilitated the dehumanization of both recruits and enemies, stretching the bounds of acceptable action and making it easier to perpetrate acts of cruelty (ibid:483). The comrades legitimated these acts as “counter-violence” to that of the state or Inkatha supporters. Their self-perception of being “home-defenders” was a key element of their group identity (Sitas 1992:637). In battles, the “Other” was never an abstraction but a specific individual who had perpetrated an attack. The “comrades” were able to imbue these people with evil qualities so that they could be physically destroyed and defeated as representations of everything wrong with the Apartheid state (Sitas 1992:638).

As the conflict became increasingly war-like, a militarization of the Comrade movement occurred. This included the self-perception of being soldiers of liberation (Campbell 1992:624). This militaristic identity was expressed through the proliferation of militant songs that emphasized language like ‘AKA’ or ‘bazooka’ and the practice of carrying toy or real guns and wearing Khaki uniforms (Sitas 1992:635). This militarization gave disempowered youth the ability to assert their unity as part of a group identity (Beinart 1992:483). During the late 1980’s, the steady legitimization of the use of violence as a political tool by these soldiers of liberation led unavoidably to a more generalized integration of violence into youth culture and identity formation.

**Generational Conflict During Apartheid**

The civic movements in the 1980s were led by a generation of young people with higher levels of education and greater expectations than their parents (Campbell 1992:627). These factors compounded the sense of frustration at unemployment, poverty, and racism, which led to a higher tolerance for violence. Life in the townships was characterized by frequent uprisings and revolts. (Chabedi 2003:363). The escalation of intrablack violence in the last days of the Apartheid state opened a cultural divide between the old and the young (Zuern 2001:12-13). The comrades explicitly defined themselves in opposition to their elders, who they labeled as “backwards.” The older generation was often defined in relation to its rural sensibilities as ignorant and complacent in the face of oppression (Campbell 1992:622). On the other hand, youth activism was perceived as insulting by elders, who were humiliated at the hands of youth by being punished for not participating in the resistance (Maake 1992:600).
Competition for resources in townships and local squatters’ villages was high. Young upstart men were quickly identified as threats to the status of older migrant workers. The perceived disrespect of the young comrades provided a justification for the use of violence by the elders that was essentially rooted in resource scarcity (Beinart 1992:467).

The age division became intensely politicized as the groups adopted opposing political allegiances (Chabedi 2003:363). By 1987, the confrontations in the homelands were officially considered to be between the young supporters of the ANC democratic movement and the supporters of Inkatha and the State (Sitas 1992:631). Police did little to stop the warfare and crime spread amid the chaos (Furlong 2001:394). Crime rates were inflated in part by the activity of gangs of young men who called themselves thugs or tsotsis. These young men abandoned any pretense of political motivation; they embraced a street thug identity and spent most of their time engaged in theft (Chabedi 2003:362). Gang membership provided them with quick access to power and weapons (Wood 2005:313). In response to the development of street gangs, the comrades stepped in as self-appointed anti-crime crusaders. The adoption of this role during the 1980s tipped the balance of power in the townships to their favour (Chabedi 2003:363).

Gendered ideals of dominance played a large role in the inter-generational conflict. Age hierarchies in the community were very important and provided elder men in the townships a position of authority. As Black labourers however, they were at the bottom of the social hierarchy outside the townships (Chabedi 2003:363). The dissolution of their last sphere of influence led to a crisis in confidence and a growing tide of antagonism toward young men (Beinart 1992:484). The symbolic association of violence with the assertion of masculinity did not only affect the elder men. The connection between violence and masculinity has become a central focus in the lives of young men, who have internalized the use of violence as an acceptable pattern of behaviour.

**Violence as an Expression of Masculinity**

The structural violence that was an integral part of Apartheid rule disempowered African men by stripping them of dignity and authority (Bhana 2005:101). Male spheres of influence were reduced to township communities and the home. In the same way that agents of the state used violence against Blacks to communicate power, African men learned to communicate their remaining power through overt acts of violence. Violence became viewed as a natural expression of masculinity and its use was legitimised as being part of the male personality or “psyche” (Campbell 1992:624).

The reassertion of African masculinity played a large role in the formation of anti-Apartheid youth groups. The militant youth subculture shaped male social identity, and violent behaviour became a powerful bonding mechanism (Beinart 1992:483). In the context of on-going warfare, violent actions were a means of judging social worth. Young men used aggressive and competitive behaviour to communicate credibility and group allegiance (ibid:481). A young man only truly belonged to the collective when he took action against his enemies (Sitas 1992:639).

Children learned to practice violent behaviour from a very early age (Bhana 2005:100). Boys who witnessed the use of violence in domestic situations learned that violence was an appropriate means of...
resolving conflict. Fathers frequently used violence in the home to ensure the obedience of wife and children (Campbell 1992:626). These patterns of violence also influenced the gender dynamics in society and in particular the sexual relationships among youth. A man’s ability to dominate his girlfriend was seen as a direct indicator of his masculinity (Campbell 1992:625). Structural violence in black communities was linked to the epidemic of violence against women. Men who have been brutalized tended to pass on the sense of shame they experienced to their partners as well (Beinart 1992:468). Gender relations exemplify the influence that exposure to violence has had on the formation of individual identity. The cultural transition that South Africa has undergone since 1994 poses many new challenges to young Africans, who continue to struggle to define themselves within shifting political and social networks.

Violence in Post-Apartheid Culture
During Apartheid, young men could choose to join ANC political associations or tsotsi street gangs. Both types of youth associations provided men with an immediate sense of excitement, power and honour (Wood 2005:304). In 1991, however, the ANC returned to legitimate politics after a period of exile and guerilla tactics. Youth interest in politics began to decline, as it lost its appeal and became bureaucratic (Chabedi 2003:365).

After the transition to majority rule in 1994, inequality among Africans intensified and bonds of solidarity and trust in the community disintegrated (Chabedi 2003:366). The majority remained poor, and many young men chafed at their continued unemployment and failure in the economy. New challenges to men’s dominant gender role increased their sense of insecurity, which caused them to assert themselves through violent displays of masculinity (Maitse 1999:55). The Tsotsi thug subculture proliferated among disenfranchised young men who no longer had a grand political struggle into which they could channel their rage.

The marginalization these youth experienced pushed them to defy the dominant social principles in their communities by flouting the law, scorning wage labour and eschewing non-violence (Wood 2005:304). The constant exposure to violence had desensitized them to the consequences of their actions for the victims. Violence continued to be socially condoned as a form of personal expression (Beinart 1992:485). Men used violence as a method of gaining self-respect in a society that they perceived was determined to strip them of it (Wood 2005:315).

The militarization of township conflicts towards the end of Apartheid had been facilitated by the availability of cheap firearms (Wood 2005:304). The number of guns increased during the 1990s as the end of the civil war in Mozambique facilitated the import of cheap AK47s (Chabedi 1992:367). Fuelled by such easy access, the ownership of guns became a status symbol among young men. Guns took on the symbolic value of communicating the ability to defend oneself and demanded the respect of other young men (ibid:367).

In the new political culture, violence lost its legitimacy as a political tool for social justice. Violence became a recreational pastime for young men who considered fighting a sport. It remained a popular method of determining a gang member’s credibility among his peers (Wood 2005:307). This shift in the symbolic meaning of violence from the
political to the recreational sphere has created a very real practical dilemma for South Africans, who now live with some of the highest crime rates in Africa (Beinart 1992:482). Of 110 countries surveyed by Interpol in 1997, South Africa had the highest murder and rape rates per capita, the second highest rate of robbery and violent theft, and the fourth highest rates of serious assault and sexual offences (Schöntech 2000: electronic document). The rape rate has been placed as high as 115.2 per 100 000 people, which is twice as much as the next highest rate in Swaziland and far greater than the rate of 28 per 100 000 in Zimbabwe (Chabedi 1992:368).

The Practical Consequences of Violence
Since the election of the ANC government in 1994, new employment opportunities have created a small Black middle class and widened income inequalities in townships. Unemployment has remained high for the majority however, and currency devaluation has increased the price of imported goods (Chabedi 1992:366). Violent crime in this situation becomes a practical reaction to material deprivation. In the context of poverty and unemployment, young men subscribe to the rule that money is power. Money represents not only the ability to provide for dependents but also represents status in such a heavily stratified society (Wood 2005:313). Guns have retained their symbolic link to power and respect (Chabedi 2003:367). They facilitate criminal activity for unemployed young men and their availability has made carjacking, armed robbery and mugging the crimes of choice for most gangs (Wood 2005:308). Carjackers often also kidnap the driver when stealing the car, and consequently fatalities during car thefts have increased (Chabedi 2003:368).

High rates of violent criminal activity affect the lives of South Africans in many ways. South Africa’s elevated levels of sexual violence have contributed to the spread of HIV/AIDS. For many years, South Africans refused to wear condoms because they believed it was a ploy by the white government to reduce the black birth rate (Chabedi 1992:368). The African majority government proved unable to handle the crisis and the ANC also failed to acknowledge and address the issue. As recently as 2000, President Thabo Mbeki has publicly questioned whether HIV causes AIDS (ibid:369). The secrecy and stigma surrounding the disease blocked communication about prevention at a crucial time and allowed the disease to reach epidemic proportions in the country (ibid:369).

Sexual violence has become increasingly socially acceptable as a pastime for young men. Women live under the constant threat of violence or rape and many public spaces in urban centers are no longer safe (Chabedi 2003:368). The practice of group sex on a woman, often by male friends, acts to reinforce gender roles (Wood 2005:306). Girls who reject sexual propositions or talk back to men face the danger of being targeted for rape as punishment for their arrogance (ibid:308). In many cases, women also face violence in the home. South African society seems to implicitly condone the physical exertion of male authority to control the family (Maitse 1999:56).

Violent behaviour is learned during childhood. South African schools are struggling to provide quality education while being beset by serious violence among students. Many schools face gang-related warfare, on-going robbery, sexual violence and murder (Harber 2001:262). Children who have been constantly exposed to violent behaviour have learned
to use it as an emotional expression (ibid:262). This is the case particularly among boys, who are responsible for the majority of violence in schools (ibid:268). Pre-pubescent boys experience an increase of male-on-male violence is used to establish a social hierarchy among the students. Boys learn that they can make other children obey them and attain material rewards by emulating certain behaviours that they see among adults (Bhana 2005:108). Boys quickly learn to communicate dominance by adopting such aggressive techniques as raising his voice, threatening others verbally, and physically assaulting them (ibid:106).

Constant fear of violence negatively affects the quality of the learning environment. This pervasive sense of fear often motivates youth to carry weapons for personal protection, heightening the danger of potential injury during confrontations (Harber 2001:266). Fear also keeps victims silent and much of the violence is never properly addressed (ibid:266). Teachers face huge challenges; they are routinely asked to deal with serious crimes like assault or rape between students while carrying a full teaching load (ibid:270).

**Conclusion**

The endemic use of violence to build identity and communicate masculinity throughout South African society is a barrier to the process of healing political and cultural divisions. (Beinart 1992:485) It has become a major social problem that is preventing South Africa from becoming a peaceful and prosperous state. The continuing use of violence within South African society goes far beyond simplistic explanations based on political motivation or material poverty. The defensive violence of anti-Apartheid groups that began as a political tool led to the development of a symbolic association between violence and personal identity. The use of violence became a bonding mechanism among men where ability and willingness to commit violent acts was a measure of a man’s self-worth and an expression of his masculinity and power. The gendered analysis of such violent behaviour is central to understanding the lives of men operating within a culture characterized by structural violence. It reveals that violence against women is caused by the same patriarchal norms of a male’s right to use violence that allow men to use crime for material gains.

The tragic consequences of the continuation of violence in South Africa include an elevated AIDS infection rate (Chabedi 1992:369), high levels of violent sexual crime (Wood 2005:308), stress on family structures (Maitse 1999:56), and the poor quality of education in schools besieged by violence (Harber 2001:266). South African society needs to address the structural inequalities that continue to exist. It must somehow find ways to incorporate its marginalized citizens into the formal economy. The Government needs to be innovative with anti-violence programs in schools. South Africa now faces the very difficult task of reversing the violent legacy of Apartheid. History has shown there will be no easy solutions.

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