

Killing as a Resource: Gang Rivals in South Africa

Godfrey Maringira

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8071-641X>

Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley, South Africa

gmaringira@gmail.com

Abstract

While killing is delegitimised by law, gangs who kill their rivals are legitimated within their social group. The central analytical argument is that the killing of gang rivals is a form of “capital” (Bourdieu 1986) that forges and produces enduring social networking relationships among gang groups. Killing is a celebrated practice within certain gang groups. The act of killing is also a rite of passage, which establishes a member within the gang group. Killing defines the “commanders” of gang groups and those who have the potential to lead a gang in the future. Killing is a source of identity and recognition. It produces certain kinds of statuses within the gang group. Those who kill the most are honoured in the gang group, while feared by the rivals. While this paper argues that killing sustains gang practices, it also examines the increased invisibility of gangs as victims of the same violence that they perpetrate.

Keywords: gangs; killing; violence; identity; territoriality

Introduction⁴ skirt around the practice of killing among gangs and their rivals. Why is it that gangs continue to kill their rivals within and beyond their territorial control? The response to this question has been centred around territory control without an understanding that gangs do kill for the “making” and “production” of particular identities and the recognition of being a gang member within a particular gang group. This paper, therefore, argues that without killing, it is never easy to maintain membership within a gang group. One has to kill for belonging to a gang group, and in the process, it solidifies power and status. Killing is, therefore, a gang resource and a form of capital. It is a gang resource because it allows individual gang members to belong to the gang group, without which they will not. Thus, the continuation of gangs killing their rivals is driven by the desire for belonging rather than simply eliminating the rivals within and beyond particular gang territories. Killing can, therefore, be seen as one of the “rituals” for entry into a gang group. It is also critical to assert that killing is a habituated practice. Why gangs kill, who they kill and the ways in which they kill are inculcated and transposed over time in and beyond the context within which gangs operate. Even though gangs do kill, the practice of killing is never easy to do. The aftermath of killing is embedded with social ills. Hence, the paper reveals that those who kill become victims of the same kind of violence they perpetrate. This paper is drawn from an ethnography of being in gang township spaces in which they reside: namely, South African townships.

Gang Violence in South Africa

The continuation of gang violence in South Africa is historical (Van Onselen 1985), but it is also about the present social and economic inequalities that characterise the townships in which the majority of gangs reside. While scholarship tends to emphasise that gangsterism signifies a “culture of violence,” it is important to note that this has to be understood against the background of the ways in which resistances against apartheid were forged in the townships. However, it is important to note that not all gangs were politically conscious, but some committed acts of criminality. Thus, gangsters were embedded within the socio-economic and political practices perpetuated by the apartheid governance (Kinnes 2000) in which the majority of non-White populations were segregated and policed differently. Of particular importance to note is that during apartheid, the South African liberation war was mainly fought in Black townships. The township spaces were battlegrounds, with apartheid security forces ravaging townships for political domination. While it is difficult to name all the gang groups that operated during apartheid, the majority of them operated in Black and Coloured townships.

Therefore, the history of gangsterism in South Africa will never be final or complete. It is shrouded with different understandings and meanings attached to gangs' activities and continuity. It is also important to note that during apartheid, there existed a blurred distinction between crime and political activism, especially among gangs (Kynoch 1999). Black townships had to fight hard to resist the apartheid system and every operation in which several laws were enacted to ensure control of the Black population. It is against this background that some Blacks who resisted the apartheid control of townships, justified their actions as more political rather than criminal. We see, therefore, that gangs emerged and operated in different locations.

One of the oldest gangs in South Africa was the Ninevites, which was formed in the early 1880s, preyed on the local Black population but also resisted the apartheid government's repressive laws that controlled the majority of non-White people (Kynoch 1999). They committed different forms of crime, especially in the mining areas of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. According to Van Onselen (1985), when the leader of the Ninevites was arrested in the early 1900s, he established himself in the prison environment and forged networks to control the movement of drugs and further organising gangs to commit crime. It is stated that Nongoloza is the godfather of present gangs, including the structural organisation of gangs (Nel 2017). These are the present Nongoloza legacies. While the Ninevites dwindled in terms of their operation, another gang known as Isitshozi became more prominent. Isitshozi predominantly stole from White-owned farms but later spread to the city, especially in Sophiatown (a high density suburb located between a mining reef and affluent White suburbs in Johannesburg), where the majority of young people settled in search of employment. In such a space, where poor young people lived in close proximity to rich White people, gangsterism was seen to expand rapidly (Gready 1990). This somehow led to the development of Tsotsis, which means criminals who thrive on petty crimes often committed in groups (Kynoch 2008; Lodge 1981). These Tsotsis were categorised into different groupings: Americans, Gestapos, the Berliners and the Vultures (see also Van Onselen 1985). While they differed regarding territorial control, they were gang groups that committed crimes, but were also involved in political activism. Importantly, they also participated in the 1949 protests in Sophiatown (Hurst 2009; Le Roux 2004). This reveals that gangs were not just criminal groupings, but operated politically as well. It should be highlighted that the distinction between crime and politics is a never-ending debate, even in the present politics, in Africa and beyond. While the politicisation of crime or the criminalisation of politics is important to interrogate so as to understand gang violence during apartheid, there are no conclusions to that debate. Such debates are characterised by subjective interpretation and analysis of events at that particular time in history.

It is important to also discuss some forms of the mutation of gang violence in South Africa. From the 1930s, until the early 1990s, the *Marashea* (known as the Russians) became dominant and was dominated by men of the Basotho, especially in the migrant communities. The *Marashea* was the most well-known and longest-standing gang in

South Africa, and was actively present from the 1930s until the mid-1990s. This gang helped to protect migrants from any other groups but members also fought apartheid racial injustices against Black people. The *Marashea* was socialised to fight as practised in the Basotho way of life, in which men are expected to fight as a way of protecting their families.

It is important to note that the 1950 Group Areas Act perpetuated the flourishing of gang violence because this Act segregated and further divided the White and Black people's places of residence (see also Bowers Du Toit 2014). Black people were not allowed to live in White people's suburbs. Thus, the conglomeration of Blacks in specific places like Soweto (Lodge 1981) and the Cape Flats (Jensen 2014) necessitated the development and sustenance of gang networks of violence. It should, therefore, be born in mind that gang violence was sustained because of the apartheid policies that aimed to ensure that Black people lived in their own spaces. It is in such spaces where Blacks were able to identify each other and organise to commit crime in and beyond the townships while resisting the apartheid system of governance.

The transition of gangs from being political during apartheid, to the notion of present-day gangs' self-understanding of their identity and belonging, is central to the current paper. While the dominant discourse views gangs as economically driven (Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya 2014), it is imperative to have an understanding that the practice of gangsterism originated from some political consciousness to protect their communities against apartheid violence (Petrus and Kinnes 2018). In the apartheid era, gangs had networks of resistance against apartheid violence in the townships. One of the key informants states:

As young people in the townships, our families looked up to us, despite being young, some referred to us as a gang group, but they liked us a lot. We operated first with knives, to protect our communities. We did not harm our community, but we targeted those who sympathised with apartheid and worked for it. We were not aligned to any liberation movement. But then the liberation movements co-opted us in their system of operation and then we were recruited to undergo training.

The involvement of gangs in the liberation struggle is also critical in the sense that whether a gang or not, the Black population had a cause in terms of joining the liberation movement. The notion of protecting their communities during the liberation struggle is critical in the sense that it allows us to think of gangs as protective and liberating (see also Fanon 1961, on violence as a liberating force). However, there is no doubt that in some cases, gangs were also criminal. There is evidence of the legitimisation and delegitimation of gangs during apartheid and in the post-apartheid era. Xaba (2001) notes that during the liberation struggle in South Africa, particular masculinities of doing violence were celebrated in the Black townships. However, with the advent of democracy, the very same masculinities were de-valourised. During apartheid, men who were involved in gang violence were seen as defenders and protectors of the community,

even though they also committed crimes in and beyond Black townships (see also Salo 2003).

Conceptualising Gangsterism

The ways in which gangs have been understood remain a challenge in both theory and practice. In terms of theory, scholarship tends to conceptualise gangs who operate on the streets and those who are involved in trans-border criminal activities as different. The challenge is to understand the differences between the criminal activities in which they are involved. It is critical to have an understanding of gangs as an act, but also as a social formation. In his writing, Pinnock (2016) notes that when we think about gangs, it is not only about those who develop organised crimes, but it also includes those who commit petty crimes in the streets. If we are to understand gangs, then we have to deploy categories of *practice* rather than categories of *analysis* (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000) so as to understand the identities which help to define gangs. Therefore, categories of practice, such as ways of belonging and identity, are critical. While gangs do engage in criminal activities, issues of respect and recognition in the communities where they reside are critical in our understanding of gangs.

A gang is a social group of at least three members, who act with a common purpose and identification. The gang members belong to the group, and their acts are criminal. They are identified by the name of the gang group, the way they communicate with each other, ways of greeting and how they dress. Such practices help to cement the group together. However, gangs have leaders, who help to structure the gang group in terms of operation. The gang leaders have control over their members and they order specific tasks for each of the members (Spergel 1990). Gangs belong to a particular territory, which they control and defend against other rival gang groups for the purposes of committing crime (Maringira 2020; Petrus 2015; Petrus 2013).

While Bowers Du Toit (2014) categorises gangs as neighbourhood-based gangs, street gangs, scavenger/“*skollie*” (petty criminal) gangs viewed as loosely organised and small (Roloff 2014), such categorisation has problems because gangs are then defined by what they do rather than who they are. The assumption is that the so-called “organised gangs” commit high profile crimes, as compared to street-based gangs. However, my assertion here is that if we are to understand gangs, then we may need to refrain from such categorisation of formal and informal gangs, organised and unorganised gangs. There is no such thing as “formal” gangs or “informal” gangs. What is it that makes them “formal” or “informal”? Is it the size of the gang group and or the crimes that they commit? In both ways, I assert that categorisation does not easily help us to understand gangs, because if we keep on re-categorising gangs, then from a theoretical perspective, we run the risk of overburdening the concept while saying nothing.

In poor communities, where life is a social and economic struggle with broken families, young people are in search of social status and recognition in the communities where they reside and beyond. Gang groups provide spaces where young people involved in

gangs gain social status, respect, a sense of belonging, collegialities, forms of identity, and a sense of acceptance and protection (Carlie 2002; Owen and Greeff 2015). In such a context, where young people are neglected by the community (including their families) gang groups become pseudo-families where a sense of being is maintained (Petersen 2019). Being a gang is viewed as being invincible, untouchable and feared within the communities where they reside. However, it is interesting that despite the fact that gangs feel invincible, they are exposed to the threat of rival gangs (see also Owen and Greeff 2015).

The Field, Negotiation and Accessing Gangs

It is never easy to do research in a context that is mirrored by violence, especially gun, machete and knife violence. On entering the field of gang violence, I was accompanied by an ex-combatant who grew up and lived in the township upon which this paper is based. At the time of doing this research, the ex-combatant was living in the same township. He was part of the community leadership. The young and the old respected him due to his background of having been an underground operative in the same community during apartheid. In post-apartheid, he was then integrated into the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). He later left the military and continued living in the same township. Because the ex-combatant had already briefed me about gang violence in the townships, I was interested in the ways in which the township people live in their specific settings. On entering the township, we met a group of seven young people. They were all wielding different weapons: machete, steel bars, a long knife and a baton stick. They were aged between 19 and 26 years. With much respect, they greeted the ex-combatant. The ex-combatant introduced these young men to me. On being introduced they were told that I was his colleague from the university and I wanted to do research on the lives of gangsters. One of the young men responded, “So, what are we going to benefit from that research? Who are you going to tell about us?” I realised that this was one of the gang groups in the townships.

With regards to the questions raised by the young man, I understood that these were deeply insightful methodological questions that we as researchers face in the field, and which are characterised by the “expectations” of the people who experience the issues we seek to understand. Because the research on gangsters was part of a bigger grant, we had already initiated conversations with the provincial government, and we had already held workshops where we planned to have a policy dialogue on gang violence. I told the young men that in doing this research we showed interest in how gangs spend their lives and what different stakeholders could do to address the problems faced by gangs, so that the intervention could help them to refrain from doing violence. They all nodded their heads. The ex-combatant later asked the young men to introduce themselves to me. On introducing themselves to me, they each first mentioned their name, and ended by saying, “but I am a gangster.” In the end, one young man said, “but me, I am the commander of all these gangsters,” while showing off his concealed knife in his trousers and holding a machete. The commander further mentioned that their gang group was

called the Fancy British. For him, the Fancy British gang likes to be smartly dressed, yet the members are killers. He was adamant that killing was the ultimate choice for their gang group because through such a practice, they dominate other gangs in the township. In his tone, the commander was vociferous. I then decided to listen more than taking the podium in the streets. I had to allow the commander to talk. For Bourdieu (1990a, 127), the streets can be understood as a “field of power” in which the gangsters’ commander occupies “positions in the space of power...” Thus, I had to be in “momentary reversion” (Higate and Cameron 2006), acknowledging that the gang commander occupied a more superior position in the street’s conversation. Bourdieu (1990a, 127) refers to this as “strategies of condescension” in which participants are given the voice in the field that is characterised by power: who is to be heard, by whom, and under what circumstances. That field of power is “habituated” from gang practice and “transposed” to the field of mere interaction (Bourdieu 1990b).

Drawing from Eastmond (2007), in telling their gang stories, gangsters explored their experiences at least on four levels—life as lived, experienced, told and life as a text. Firstly, they talked about their past and present *as lived*. They discussed events that were about their personal life, at an individual level, especially how they felt about what they do. Secondly, they spoke about their lives as *experienced*—that is, their past was viewed as a momentary journey in which they themselves ascribed to the social, spiritual and the economy of the context in which they lived. Thirdly, they presented their lives as *told*—how they viewed themselves as narrators, convinced that they owned the story that they were telling. Finally, their gang stories of life were *a text*—that is, they did not just tell a story in a random way; rather meaning was attached to what they did, how they did it, with what social and economic consequences. Of importance is that their lived experiences were textualised because they also reflected on their past, giving meaning to the present. Sometimes they asked different questions about themselves: Why do I kill? Such is a social and political question? Thus, the stories of being a gang produced what Bourdieu (1990b, 124) refers to as an “account of the accounts,” that is, the stories told, produce a multifaceted story about the gang with different roles, even in the gang group. Eastmond (2007) asserts that stories produce forms of identity. This allowed me to analyse the data through what Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) call the “thematisation of meanings” where the themes and meanings of the text were drawn from the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). While gangs talk about their life stories, how they grew up, and other related issues within their communities, gang life is central to how they understand themselves. The gang members talk about how they joined gang groups, and how they operate within such groups. They also talk about how they kill others, an issue which is central in this paper.

Killing as a Form of Capital

Drawing from Bourdieu’s (1986) idea of social capital, it is critical to understand killing as a form of capital in the sense that killing produces certain forms of social relationships among gang groups. The practice of killing resides in both the individual and the

collective gang group. Killing determines the position and status occupied by the gang members who do the killing. Those who kill, mobilise and exert power within the group. This is so because social capital is not uniformly embodied within the group. Thus, Bourdieu (1986) reveals that social capital is evident through social networks that create differentiated power and social positions within groups.

Being a gang member is characterised by violence. One has to provide an effort to be recognised within the group. The gangs view killing as a way in which they eliminate their gang rivals in the communities where they operate. During interviewing Melisizwe, the gang, one of the questions on killing was: “Can you tell me, that moment of killing, how does it feel?” The gang responded, “actually at that moment you don’t feel anything because you will be full of anger and rage but after that you feel like you have accomplished something. You feel happy that you eliminated one of the problems.” So, ideally the gang rivals are viewed as a problem that needs to be eliminated. The notion of killing is driven by anger and rage. However, Marlantes (2010) talks about the thrill of killing in the context of war, in which those who kill view themselves as heroes. The notion of “feeling happy” after killing is an inner feeling of the self in the midst of violence. In a context that is characterised by abject poverty and marginalisation (Petrus 2015), killing becomes a source of happiness and self-satisfaction. What this then tells us is that the notion of being happy, is never easy to attain. One has to kill for it.

However, even if gangs do not kill, they celebrate any form of permanent injury that they may have caused. Nkosi notes:

My friend, that one [showing me another gang member] stabbed one of the gangs who lives there [pointing to the other side of the township] and now that guy is using a wheelchair, he is now crippled [smiling].

The notion of friendship in and among gangs is cemented and solidified by the violence they do together. The gangs reveal their courage of not fearing death. The fight is also depicted as a war, where those who fight in it, are prepared to die for it. One of the gang members, Mpilo, notes, “I am not scared of dying. Death is just death, whether I am shot by a gun or stabbed by a knife.” The gangs are aware that they will eventually die from gang violence, either by gun and or knife. However, what is important to understand is that gangs do not just want to die so easily from gang violence. They try by all means necessary to defend themselves in the midst of violence.

The practice of killing is understood as a difficult task, one which can be made easier by guns. One of the gang members, Thandi, notes, “but now I want to have a gun because with a gun, I don’t have to do a physical fight. I just shoot someone from a distance. If you don’t have a gun, you can be easily killed.” The gun is viewed as a weapon of and with power. It is instrumentalised for killing easily, while defending the perpetrator of the violence. The celebration of guns is mediated by those who have the zeal and zest to kill easily. There is a deep relationship between guns and gangs, with

the sole purpose of killing easily. Those interested in guns continue to imagine the function of guns in doing violence. This is a “gun mentality” (Maringira 2020). Such a mentality continues to hunt gangsters. Guns can be sources of identity for gang members as killers. What the gun does is that it forges a particular social relationship with gangs, to enhance their status and recognition as well. The knowledge of using guns is gained in the streets. Thus, drawing from Anderson (1990), because of their capacity to learn and produce knowledge in the streets, gangs can be understood as “streetwise.” The gun structures the streets and gang operations. By “structuring the structures” (Bourdieu 1990b), the gun is instrumentalised to minimise the physical fight and or hand-to-hand fight between gangs. In this regard, we can understand the gun not just as an object, but as a field that organises social functions (Bourdieu 1990b): those of killing easily. The gun as a field helps us to understand the *doxa*, which is characterised by the orthodox and heterodox (Bourdieu 1984); that is, the taken-for-granted issues are critical in our understanding of how killing is given a particular meaning, through certain social practices which guide social action.

However, in the absence of guns, gangs use heavy weapons. What kills is not only the gun but other handy weapons as well. It reveals that killing is not only in the weapon one uses, but killing resides in a particular individual. What kills is the perpetrator’s motive and desire over an individual. One of the gang members, Sisipho, had confidence in the weapons they used to kill:

This is a steel bar [showing it off]. If it gets you in your head or in your face it will destroy your face, it will make you ugly and this will make our enemies pay for what they did to us because of the weapons that we have. This one is not nice, you can’t even walk when it strikes you. It can even break your spine. It will break every bone, that’s why we love it and that guy [pointing at the other gang member] my friend knows how to use it and knows where to beat people.

While weapons such as steel bars do kill and deform gang rivals’ faces, the gangs who use them “love them.” They also know how to effectively use them. The use of weapons and what these weapons do are known by the gangsters themselves. The gangs have trust in their weapons: “it will destroy your face ... it will make you ugly ... this will make our enemies pay for what they did to us ... you can’t even walk when it strikes you ... it can ... break your spine ... it will break every bone ...” This depicts the confidence the gangs have in the weapons they use. The choice of what weapon to use when fighting rivalry gangs is quite clear and personalised. This demonstrates the agency that the gangs have in using particular weapons over others.

The idea about weapons is that they are individualistic and personalised, yet the function is collective. As noted by Sindiswa, “but me and my friends we only use knives and other hand weapons. But when we fight our gang rivals, we make sure one of them is dead.” The idea of ownership is embedded in this quote. There is a sense that the weapons are owned by the individual gangs, taking responsibility for the weapons each of them has, while collectively agreeing on the use of such weapons and the known and

defined enemy. For Nobomi, “I have my own weapon, everyone has his own, and specialises on those weapons, mine if it hits your legs, it will break your legs. So, with my friends, we fight together and stick together.” The weapons are viewed as each “having his own” with particular specialisation in the group, on who hits with what and where, depending on the skills each of them has in the gang group. Despite the heroism within gang groups, they are also victims of the same violence which they perpetrate. In their storytelling about themselves as gangs who kill, they also depict themselves as victims.

Death, Dying and Revenge: Perpetrators-victims

Can we think of gangsters as the hunted by other gang rivals, and falling victim to the same kinds of weapons that they use? Given what we know about gangs, of them as killers, drug addicts and robbers, it is quite hard to pigeon-hole them within the “victimological gaze” (McGarry and Walklate 2011, 900). While it is challenging to conjure up and implore a gang member as a victim, young men who spend their lives with weapons in their hands, hunting others to decimate them, find themselves in pain and agony of being attacked as well. Nocawe, a gang member, notes:

My friend [a gang member] was shot and died just by my side when he was just close to me, he was shot by a gun. It was really painful to see my friend dying like that. Again, you see my brother was stabbed and died on 1 January in 2017. He was aged 21.

This assertion depicts that in as much as gangsters hunt, injure and or kill other rival gangs, they are also wounded and killed by others as well. Such a reality can be construed as “gang victimhood.” The gangster is never only a perpetrator during all the times of their operations. In the process of victimhood, when injured and or when their friends get killed, gangs do report to the police. In re-telling how his gang friend was killed by rivalry gangs, Zulungile notes:

You know that happens with the police, is that if you go to the police to report the matter that I was stabbed with this guy, they will tell you we are not seeing that guy who stabbed you, but we will be seeing him every day and most of those guys will be walking up and down.

The police are viewed as not responding to the gangs’ reports of their friends being killed by rival gangs. Gangs do not wait for unresponsive police. They act of their own volition. The response is violent. One of the gang members, Khanyiswa, notes:

You see I was stabbed here on my mouth and on my leg last week and we went there to report to the police and the police told us that they are going to apprehend him, but they didn’t catch him and I waited until I am healed. I am now looking for that guy who stabbed me, that’s why you saw me there that time because I am constantly looking for him now, I heard that he went to the shopping mall, and we are waiting for him to come back home so that we can fight him and his group. When I catch him, I will make sure

that I stab him. I have to make sure that he can feel the same pain that I felt. I want to even paralyse him. Even if the police don't arrest him, we will make sure that he is dead.

While Singerman (2013, 1) talks about the “limbo of waithood” the gangsters are not waiting for the police. They act as they see fit to resolve the circumstances that they face and experience. For Hage (2009) this can be viewed as “waiting out of the crisis,” that is, the ability to “stick it out.”

I got stabbed and then I went to hospital and I got all these stiches and I came back. You see I was also stabbed at the back. I really want to stab that guy and I know the time that he goes out of his house. I will see him and will get him. You see this thing [weapon] when it catches him, he will collapse, if it hits you on the head between make you dizzy then I cut his nose with this knife.

This is an “essential paradox of gangsterism” in which a gangster is overly viewed and understood as a masculine figure capable of killing, yet within the same context he is a target of violence. Killing is characterised by the “hope to kill” the rival gang. That hope is characterised by patience in killing, that is, the gangsters know how to wait for the right time and place to kill. For Havel (1990, 181) “hope ... is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.” In view of the police's unresponsiveness, there is a “shrinking configuration of hope” to expect the police to deal with gang violence.

I was shot with a gun three times and I survived. You see all these scars are from bullets, here it came in through here [pointing to his leg] it goes out through this place. The other one is here [scar]. It was a gunshot and it's a bullet inside my hand, can you feel it [grabbing my hand to touch the scar on his hand]. So, I have a small metal in my hand to support my hand.

The scars depict the memory of violence and are forms of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1984). The scars invoke memories of past gang violence within the gang community and invite revenge against gang rivals. They are the legacies of violence that continue to hunt them. It makes gangsters remember in a myriad of ways. The scars are not all the same; some have bullets inside while others do not. For Lomsky-Feder (2004, 82), this resembles a “memory field” in which memory is understood differently. Importantly, scars provoke and reproduce other forms of violence. Scars are sources of violence. So, what is interesting about scars is that they produce moments of death and pain, but they are also heroic in a sense. This is a personal memory (Winter and Sivan 1999) that is embedded in the collective action. The gangsters do not just remember and speak about their individual selves, rather in remembering, they also talk about their brothers and friends who have been killed by rival gangs. This is a collective memory (Winter and Prost 2005). In re-calling their experiences of being wounded, gangsters present a collective memory of what happened, not just to themselves but to other gangs as well. This then, constitutes a memory field within the community of which they are a part (Winter 1995).

You know this is a very dirty life and I no longer want to live this life because it's all about fighting and robbery and I no longer like this life because I have seen so many people dying and I have seen my friends dying, not just my friends only, but also my enemies as well.

Killing has a “transformative repercussion” (Lomsky-Feder 2004, 83). This means that killing rival gangs and witnessing friends being killed, will have social consequences in that it changes the ways in which gangsters think about themselves. Killing makes gangs think about their families, the community and their everyday gang practices. Hynes (1999) presented two distinctive elements about being involved in violence: immediacy and reflection. In the former, gangs talk about the here and now, in particular how they killed, what they used to kill and with what benefit. However, in the latter, many years after being involved in killing others, a gangster reflects on the past journey into the present and begins to think about what the future holds for him. It is after some years that the gang starts thinking about gang life as a “dirty life” that he “no longer wants to live”; a life that he no longer adores in the present. For Vigh (2009, 8), this is the “temporal condensation of crisis” in which a crisis of seeing people dying (friends and enemies), gangs are changed by the character and practice of killing rivals.

Gangs continue to be hunted by the spirits of those whom they have killed. They are spiritually hunted in their dreams. Sizwe, a gang member, says: “I go to the *Sangoma* [traditional healer] and get this *muti* [showing off the herbal medicine in his pocket] to wash myself to chase away the spirit and after washing myself nothing will happen to me.” For the gangster, the *muti* works to some extent. Thus, the gang members visit a church as well to be delivered from the evil spirits—the gang rivals they had killed. While Meyer (1998) asserts that churches help in attaining a “complete break with past” dealing with bad dreams in such spaces is only temporary. The spirits of people killed by gangsters are somehow difficult to break. The gangsters struggle to shrug-off these bad dreams. For Tankink (2007), the church may only offer “temporary effects” in dealing with members’ past experiences. Indeed, the gangsters confessed that the use of *muti* and participating in church only reduced the intensity of the bad dreams. The evil spirits that torment them in their dreams continue to hunt them, though with less intensity. The gangsters find it difficult to reconcile the *muti* and the church because the spirits of the people whom they have killed, continue to hunt them in their dreams.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the ways in which killing is a social resource within gang groups. The paper reveals our understanding of why gangs continue to kill their rivals. Gangs kill for social recognition within their community and gang groups. This paper contributes to broad debates on killing by asserting that those who kill their perceived rivals seek recognition, identity and belonging. This helps us to understand that issues of recognition, identity and belonging in practice are never easy to attain: others (like gangs) kill for it. In a context that is characterised by socio-economic marginalisation, recognition, identity and inclusivity are markers of being part of the community where

one belongs. However, it is also critical to understand that those who kill are never invincible; in the end they are also victims of the same violence that they perpetrate. The invisibility of perpetrator victimhood is interesting in theorising killing, especially in the ways in which it challenges our understanding of those who do violence.

Author Affiliation

Sol Plaatje University, School of Humanities, Social Sciences, Social Anthropology, Kimberley, South Africa.

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