

Transnational Agents: Understanding the motives of South African Defence Force veterans who return to Angola

A number of South African Defence Force (SADF) veterans have undertaken trips to the erstwhile Angolan battlefields of the so-called 'Border War' (1966–1989) in recent years. They have done so in different capacities and circumstances. One of these journeys took the form of a motorized convoy that amounted to tourist safari in which veterans revisited war sites primarily to pay tribute to their own dead. Another assumed the form of a penitent pilgrimage by a solo cyclist who attempted to interact with Angolans (and a Cuban veteran) encountered during the journey. A third involved the making of a film that records the journey of former paratrooper who returned to Angola in search of redemption from his shameful memories relating to his role in the war. The fourth involved a trip to Angola by a group of SADF veterans who initiated joint ventures and sourced investment to provide employment for Angolan veterans. Such projects are invariably framed as exercises in reconciliation between former enemies who celebrate a new-found camaraderie occasioned by their common histories as soldiers.

To date I have published two pieces on SADF veterans who have returned to Angola (Baines 2018, 2020). This paper seeks to build on these publications and offer further insights as to why SADF veterans return to Angola. It conceives of SADF veterans as 'transnational agents' who have crossed borders in order to promote co-operation or engage in acts of restitution rather than dwell on past ideological and political differences. But it contends that these acts are as much about coming to terms with the veterans' own pasts as they are about rapprochement with the Angolans.

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