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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"We Were the Army in the Shadows": The Dynamics of Military Rule and Experiences of Black Women in the South African Defence Force 32 Battalion Military Community

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Abstract

In this article, we demystify the South African Defence Force's 32 Battalion and de-exceptionalize the apartheid military by connecting it to other colonial military communities, and apartheid governance more broadly. Drawing on oral history, autoethnography, and archival documents, we demonstrate the highly unequal, yet mutual, reliance of white authorities and elite Black women in the haphazard and improvised nature of apartheid military rule. Most women arrived at the unit's base, Buffalo, as Angolan refugees, where white military authorities fixated on their domestic and family lives. We examine the practical workings of military rule by considering three nodes of social surveillance and control. Elite Black women, known as "block leaders," served as intermediaries, actively participating in the mechanics of military rule while also using their position to advocate for their community. Finally, we consider the ingrained violent patriarchal nature of life in the community by highlighting the nature of women's precariousness and labor.

Keywords: Southern Africa; Angola; Namibia; South Africa; military; apartheid; women; colonial intermediaries

Militaries are social institutions. They run on relationships of trust and dependency. As Holly Mayer notes, a military is more than just troops and commanders: it is "an assembly of both military and civilian persons… bound together by duty, economics, or affection, and governed by military rule and custom."[1] Militaries demand the labor and social adhesion of noncombatants who come to form a co-constitutive community with its own norms, hierarchies, and economies, informed by the military itself. This is no different for colonial militaries. While other scholars have examined military communities in European colonial contexts, we focus on a military community formed around the apartheid-era South African Defence Force's (SADF) most mythologized unit: 32 Battalion.

Cynthia Enloe argues that military officials in general both think about women and attempt to "control and use women," yet conceal their dependence on them.[2] This was no different for the 32 Battalion military community. While white officers saw themselves in a dual function as both military men and social workers, elite Black women served as intermediaries between authorities and

[1]Holly A. Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community during the American Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 1.
[2]Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarisation of Women's Lives* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), v.

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the wider community. Running the community required improvised relationships between white officers bent on managing and engineering Black life and Black women who not only sought out the best for themselves and their community but also carved out relative authority for themselves. Some Black women intermediaries also embraced this role, their position in the community, and their contribution to the war effort. As one former intermediary put it, "We were the army in the shadows."[3]

Commanded by white officers, 32 Battalion comprised Angolan refugees fleeing the brutal, turbulent civil war that broke out between three liberation movements during Angola's decolonization in 1975. Most of the first Angolan recruits to 32 Battalion came from the Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA), which had been supported by the apartheid regime and the United States. However, after the FNLA lost ground to the Soviet- and Cuban-backed Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), US and South African authorities threw their weight behind the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) to violently secure power over the newly independent state. As the FNLA collapsed, many troops — often following personal allegiances to officers — joined the SADF to secure refuge for themselves and their loved ones, while hoping to politically reassert themselves in Angola. The SADF, in turn, seized the opportunity to deploy Angolan troops in its effort to prevent communist rule on its borders. These first recruits were later joined by other Angolan refugees who fled to South African-occupied Namibia throughout the late 1970s and 1980s.[4]

By virtue of its refugee composition, 32 Battalion, unlike most SADF units, included a large civilian community.[5] In 1989, over 720 women and more than 2,000 children were living at the unit's remote Namibian base, Buffalo, dwarfing the total number of roughly 1,000 soldiers.[6] These women and children lived in the *kimbo*, the township area of the base. In contrast to the women at Buffalo, most of the community's men, as soldiers, were regularly absent for extended periods of time — from weeks to even months. Amid such an imbalance, women created a social world and stood as key pillars of authority. However, women have remained largely unrecognized in existing literature on 32 Battalion.[7]

Extensive oral history and autoethnographic observation, combined with rich archival and documentary research, reveals a colonial military community shaped by Southern African settler colonialism when most European colonial forces had already departed the continent. While 32 Battalion might have been anachronistic, it was not exceptional but part of a broader colonial military history across Africa. De-exceptionalizing the apartheid-era military enriches the broader study

[3] Interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 13 Sep. 2022.

[4] For more on the composition of the unit, see: Lennart Bolliger and Will Gordon, "'Forged in Battle': The Transnational Origins and Formation of Apartheid South Africa's 32 'Buffalo' Battalion, 1969–1976," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 46, no. 5 (2020): 881–901; Gerhard Seibert, *Coup d'état in São Tomé e Príncipe: Domestic Causes, the Role of Oil and Former "Buffalo" Battalion Soldiers* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2003); and Piet Nortje, *32 Battalion: The Inside Story of South Africa's Elite Fighting Unit* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2003). See also Lennart Bolliger, "Fleeing the Wrong Way: Black Angolan Refugees and Apartheid South Africa's Military Humanitarianism at the Angolan-Namibian Border, 1975–1978," *International History Review* 45, no. 4 (2023): 698–717.

[5] In this way, the SADF unit and military community most akin would be the SADF's 31 Battalion.

[6] The census also listed 305 dependents, 14 widows, and 48 orphans: Department of Defence Documentation Centre, Pretoria (DODDC), 32 Bn Gp 2, box 61, 107/1/1, Versekering / Assuransie: Groepsversekering, "106/22/5/SP," 1. The experiences of children raised in colonial military communities such as Buffalo are worthy of further study. What we can say here is that, whereas the SADF formally conscripted white boys from the age of seventeen, Black boys as young as fifteen were recruited into 32 Battalion. Some were strong-armed into enlisting by white officers or their families after dropping out of school or as punishment for impregnating a girl out of wedlock. Other boys lied about their age because they needed to earn a survival income for themselves and their families. Yet others were influenced by deeply militarized ideals of masculinity and eager to follow in their fathers' and uncles' footsteps. In any case, as one man put it, "everybody knew that here [at Buffalo] it's the army or nothing": interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 11 Feb. 2020.

[7] One key exception comes from a community member: Teresa Kutala Firmino, "Rewriting History: Pomfret Community Stories" (Master's thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2018), 78–82.

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of colonial military communities and demonstrates how non-elite women's lives at Buffalo were characterized by a deep sense of precariousness, both from within and without.

Situating 32 Battalion and colonial military communities in Africa

The historiography on colonial military communities in Africa has focused on European colonial powers, particularly Britain, France, Germany, and Belgium.[8] As a result, the apartheid-era SADF has not been analyzed alongside other colonial militaries. This South African exceptionalism is not unique to the SADF but consistent with South Africa's colonial historiography more broadly.[9] As Dag Henrichsen, Giorgio Miescher, Ciraj Rassool, and Lorena Rizzo highlight, "South Africa is seldom theorized as having been a colonial state attempting to build an empire," with its colony of Namibia having "acquired the status of a non-place."[10] Even among scholars working on Namibia, few have referred to the SADF as a colonial military, and only in passing.[11] In this article, our first aim is therefore to de-exceptionalize South Africa's colonial history by examining the military community that emerged around 32 Battalion.

Nicknamed Os Terríveis ("The Terrible Ones"), 32 Battalion has maintained near mythological status within and beyond South Africa.[12] Memoirs and amateur histories by white veterans have been central to 32 Battalion's mythologization, often describing it as the SADF's "most controversial and legendary fighting unit" and "one of the most extraordinary army units in post-World War II military history."[13] This literature is shaped by a wider settler colonial and frontier mythology.[14] Some of 32 Battalion's enemies reinforced the unit's mythological status by denouncing it as "shock troops … engaged in the dirtiest fighting inside Angola and other frontline states."[15] Yet while the

[8]See Bryant P. Shaw, "Force Publique, Force Unique: The Military in the Belgian Congo, 1914–1939" (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1984); J. Malcolm Thompson, "Colonial Policy and the Family Life of Black Troops in French West Africa, 1817–1904," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23, no. 3 (1990): 423–53; Timothy H. Parsons, "All *Askaris* Are Family Men: Sex, Domesticity and Discipline in the King's African Rifles, 1902–1964," in *Guardians of Empire: The Armed Forces of the Colonial Powers c. 1700–1964*, eds. David Killingray and David Omissi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 157–78; Timothy H. Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File: Social Implications of Colonial Military Service in the King's African Rifles, 1902–1964* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999); Timothy J. Lovering, "Authority and Identity: Malawian Soldiers in Britain's Colonial Army, 1891–1964" (PhD dissertation, University of Stirling, 2002); Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Vincent Crapanzano, *The Harkis: The Wound That Never Heals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Michelle R. Moyd, "Making the Household, Making the State: Colonial Military Communities and Labor in German East Africa," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 80, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 53–76; Sarah J. Zimmerman, "*Mesdames Tirailleurs* and Indirect Clients: West African Women and the French Colonial Army, 1908–1918," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 44, no. 2 (2011): 299–322; Ruth Ginio, "'Cherchez la femme': African Gendarmes, Quarrelsome Women, and French Commanders in French West Africa, 1945–1960," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 47, no. 1 (2014): 37–53; Michelle R. Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries: African Soldiers, Conquest, and Everyday Colonialism in German East Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014); Sarah J. Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage: West African Soldiers' Conjugal Traditions in Modern French Empire* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020).

[9]Philip Bonner, Jonathan Hyslop, and Lucien van der Walt, "Rethinking Worlds of Labour: Southern African Labour History in International Context," *African Studies* 66, nos. 2–3 (2007): 137–67.

[10]Dag Henrichsen, Giorgio Miescher, Ciraj Rassool, and Lorena Rizzo, "Rethinking Empire in Southern Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41, no. 3 (2015): 431.

[11]Vincent Mwange, "Civil-Military Relations in Namibia, 1990–2005" (PhD dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 2006), 55; Heike Becker, "The Least Sexist Society? Perspectives on Gender, Change and Violence among Southern African San," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29, no. 1 (2003): 21.

[12]Cinema audiences around the world first heard about 32 Battalion in the 2006 film *Blood Diamond*, in which Leonardo DiCaprio's character is a veteran of the unit.

[13]Nortje, *32 Battalion*; "32 Battalion | Justin SW Taylor," accessed 2 Sep. 2022, https://justinswtaylor.com/32-battalion/.

[14]Richard Levi Raber, "'In the Eyes of the New Government, We Are Covered in Mud': Cultural Memory, Generational Conflict, and the Imprint of Militarization on Two Former Military Communities" (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2024), ch. 1.

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unit undoubtedly perpetrated brutal violence against its enemies and even members of its own community, our second aim in this article is to demystify 32 Battalion, again by highlighting the unit's remarkable resemblance to other colonial armies. The character and makeup of 32 Battalion — and indeed, of the SADF — is therefore not exceptional but rather anachronistic: it was a colonial army in a rapidly decolonizing, even postcolonial world.

Just as South African colonial military communities remain disconnected from those elsewhere in Africa, they have not been sufficiently considered in relation to southern Africa more broadly. Like other colonial military units in Africa, 32 Battalion operated on the disposability of Black life as well as extensive practices of migration and deployment. Enloe writes, "to demystify the military and to uncover all the ways it resembles the rest of [a] society… makes it possible… to shed light on aspects of the military ordinarily overlooked."[16] As a form of labor, soldiering in 32 Battalion was shaped by colonial and apartheid imperatives.[17] Like other colonial militaries, 32 Battalion did not function in a vacuum. Rather, its operation, staffing, and mission relied on, and created other forms of labor, political economy, and social organization. As with other pools of labor dependent on migration, new forms of community and social life emerged at the base.[18] The 32 Battalion community was shaped by the dictates of a racist political economy that pooled communities together from disparate backgrounds and demanded a new social order.

Like other regional labor communities (and akin to military communities elsewhere), 32 Battalion required a range of actors to fulfill various gendered economic, social, and political functions. Women's often unpaid and underrecognized labor — raising children, cooking, doing laundry, cleaning, and gathering water and firewood — was essential to the creation, functioning, and survival of colonial militaries. Together, colonial soldiers and their household members thus came to form military communities. Serving in noncombat roles, troops' families "created the conditions by which soldiers could continue to fight."[19] Focusing on these actors, Sarah Zimmerman writes that "[French colonial] West African campaigns depended on the continual incorporation of civilians into the military community."[20] For colonial armies to function, civilians were not merely incidental or a charge of the state but a central component of their mechanics. Identifying how women participated in the 32 Battalion military community expands this argument, showing how Black women cemented their own position in the community's class structure through their skills, activities, and reputations, forged in conjunction with their spouses' rank.

Likewise, colonial military authorities — equally anxious about and ignorant of the gendered, ethnic, racial, and generational norms among soldiers and their families — recognized the necessity and import of shaping gendered social norms and fostering a pattern of social reproduction. They aimed to create conditions to develop and reinforce a supply chain of reliable, loyal indigenous troops. This typically included policies and practices centered on women and children.[21] For instance, in her study of German East African military communities, Michelle Moyd effectively demonstrates German authorities' fixation on the lives of women and the household affairs of the community: they took the role and concerns of women seriously.[22]

[15]National Archives of Namibia, Windhoek, folder TLE 0834, "The 'Buffalo Battalion': South Africa's Black Mercenaries," *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, no. 13 (July–Aug. 1981): 16–17.

[16]Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You?* 6.

[17]Joël Glasman and Michelle R. Moyd, "Military and Police," in *General Labour History of Africa: Workers, Employers and Governments, 20th–21st Centuries*, eds. Stefano Bellucci and Adreas Eckert (Woodbridge, UK: Currey, 2019), 333–60.

[18]For instance, some men took on feminine roles as migrant workers in Southern African mines: Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa c. 1860–1910* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994).

[19]Michelle R. Moyd, "Gender and Violence," in *Gender and the Great War*, eds. Susan R. Grayzel and Tammy M. Proctor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 197.

[20]Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage*, 50.

[21]Stacey Hynd, "'Uncircumcised Boys' and 'Girl Spartans': Youth, Gender and Generation in Colonial Insurgencies and Counterinsurgency, c. 1954–59," *Gender and History* 33, no. 2 (2021): 536–56.

[22]Specifically, consider Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 155–56.

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The SADF and 32 Battalion fit into these respective historiographies and further reveal white authorities' preoccupations and relationships with Black women — and particularly with Black women who served as colonial intermediaries in the community's class formation. Illuminating the practical workings of life at Buffalo also serves to demythologize the community, demystify the SADF, and de-exceptionalize South African history while contributing to the literature on colonial military communities in Africa.

A military community in its origins: the presence and pathways of women at Buffalo

Formed from a refugee community, women were present at Buffalo from the unit's inception. Some women arrived at Buffalo with preexisting relationships to soldiers recruited into 32 Battalion.[23] Others arrived at Buffalo as the "girlfriends" of men they met during their exodus from Angola — men who had offered a degree of security and protection. Some women were mere teenagers at this point.[24] Later, other women relocated to the base as dependents of soldiers, driven by various reasons ranging from love to the relative prosperity of marriage to a soldier. Like their male counterparts, many Angolan women refugees in northern Namibia viewed affiliation with the SADF as the central means of social mobility or survival beyond languishing in refugee camps or depending on informal, hazardous labor. Marriage and partnership with 32 Battalion soldiers were their chief tools of securing the well-being of themselves and their children.

For their part, only married soldiers were permitted to stay at the kimbo, while single men lived in the company lines where community and family lives were restricted. In a sense, this dynamic was akin to apartheid arrangements in South Africa itself, in which urban housing was designated solely for Black married couples.[25] At Buffalo, marriage was "the ticket" to a life of relative prosperity. One former soldier recounted that it was "not difficult" to find a woman at one of the nightclubs in Rundu, a northern Namibian border town which was Buffalo's nearest urban center and host to a sizable Angolan refugee community. One woman explained that, in fact, many Angolan women in Rundu were looking to marry a soldier from 32 Battalion.[26] Most women approached by soldiers were Angolan refugees who were suffering financial hardship, entering "marriages of convenience."[27] Among them was one woman who fled the Angolan civil war to Rundu in early 1976:

> In 1980, I met a soldier. He came to ask me if I would live with him. It was a very difficult decision for Angolans in Namibia; it was very difficult to get work. We did not have any studies or qualifications to enable us to get work. Rundu was a small post, a small village. There were no jobs that we could do… . I accepted that man's proposal to go and live with him in Buffalo.[28]

In the initial days of the unit, there was an immense gender imbalance: three men for every woman (approximately 1,200 men and 400 women at Buffalo), which fomented internal conflict and rivalry among the troops. In response, white military authorities themselves brought women to Buffalo. The unit's founder, Jan Breytenbach, responded by trafficking and recruiting women for sex work. Some were captured during a skirmish with UNITA forces while others were recruited in nearby refugee camps.[29] In doing so, Breytenbach drew on a long tradition of sex as martial compensation by arrang-

[23]Interview by one of the authors, North West, South Africa, 2 July 2022.

[24]Interview by one of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 2 Feb. 2023.

[25]Deborah Posel, "Marriage at the Drop of a Hat: Housing and Partnership in South Africa's Urban African Townships, 1920s–1960s," *History Workshop Journal* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 58.

[26]Interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 13 Feb. 2020; interview by two of the authors, North West, South Africa, 14 Mar. 2020.

[27]See Posel, "Marriage," 58.

[28]Historical Papers Research Archive, University of the Witwatersrand (HPRA), "Missing Voices" Oral History Project, 2004–12, A3079, B.1.45, Meriam Nainda, interview by Jose Manuel "Guerra" Chimupi, Pomfret, Apr. 2005, transcript and recording.

[29]Piet Nortje, *The Terrible Ones: A Complete History of 32 Battalion* (Cape Town: Zebra, 2012), 261–64.

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ing for a brothel with Black women to "service" soldiers at Buffalo.[30] The brothel also offered a means of developing a revenue stream for the unit — itself a breach of section 10 of the Immorality Act, which explicitly criminalized operating and profiting from brothels.[31] Reportedly only available to white soldiers, the brothel is an example of powerful white men blatantly breaking their own rules, in this instance on miscegenation.

Yet, reflecting on setting up the multiracial unit, Breytenbach claims, "This did not mean that suddenly sexually 'liberated' white men could sally forth into the kimbo to casually claim 'black crumpet' when the urge came upon them… the women in all cultures must be treated with respect and with a certain amount of protectiveness. This we adhered to at all times."[32] While he did not write about the brothel directly, Breytenbach's remark connotes a racist paternalism that justified the brothel as a means to regulate his white troops' avaricious sexual inclinations, and thus "protect" the Black women he deemed worthy of safeguarding, namely those tied to the unit's Black troops. The brothel closed near the end of Breytenbach's tenure, and the women largely left for Rundu. However, at least one woman married a 32 Battalion soldier and remained at Buffalo.[33] Like other women in the community, these women came from a context of extreme precariousness brought on by the war in Angola.

Some mixed-race women from Angola arrived in Namibia with Black men who became 32 Battalion troops at Buffalo. Upon arriving at Buffalo, some of them divorced Black soldiers they had married — sometimes forcibly — while fleeing Angola due to perceived class and racial differences as well as instances of domestic abuse.[34] According to one founding Black member of the unit, white officers forcibly ended these relationships, with some of the mixed-race women reportedly being taken by white authorities to work at the brothel.[35] In contrast, white soldiers with Black spouses — such as Danny Roxo, a Portuguese settler with a Black Mozambican wife — were tolerated and even remain celebrated today.[36]

Women were driven to Buffalo for various reasons, often tied to their survival, but they all shared one thing in common: their position and life on base was almost always contingent on their connection to a soldier. All women at Buffalo, as refugees or as the children of refugees, came from a place of precariousness. Due to their sustained presence and their intimate relationships to soldiers, women came under the scrutiny of military authorities who sought to regulate their presence, order the community's social and familial lives, and designate a degree of authority to select women intermediaries.

Gert Nel's tenure and the social engineering of family life at Buffalo

With Breytenbach's departure, a new Officer Commanding (OC), Gert Nel, took command of the unit in 1977. Counter to Breytenbach, a self-styled maverick, Nel was a career bureaucrat who sought to bring order and respectability to the unit. Driven by Nel's racist paternalism dressed up in the language of military organization and efficiency, white officers became interested in, even anxious about, understanding the organization of Black family life. It became imperative for them to know

[30] *Ibid*. This practice was not unique to the South African military under apartheid — for instance, the French colonial military practiced something similar: Catherine Phipps, "Between Metropole and Colony: *Bordels Militaires de Campagne* in Colonial Morocco and France in the Twentieth Century," *French History* 37, no. 3 (2023): 254–72; Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage*.

[31] Consider India Geronimo Thusi, "Policing Sex: The Colonial, Apartheid, and New Democracy Policing of Sex Work in South Africa," *Fordham International Law Journal* 38, no. 1 (2015): 205–44.

[32] Jan Breytenbach, *The Tempered Sword: Forged in Battle Revisited; Operation Savannah and the Birth of 32Bn* (Sandton: Bushwarrior.com, 2011), 281.

[33] Nortje, *The Terrible Ones*, 264.

[34] Interview by one of the authors, Western Cape, South Africa, 15 Sep. 2023.

[35] Nortje, *The Terrible Ones*, 264.

[36] Consider *South African Military History Society Eastern Cape Branch*, July 2006, accessed 8 Aug. 2023, http://samilitaryhistory.org/6/p06julne.html.

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which dependents "belonged" to which soldiers.[37] This anxiety fit within a broader pattern in colonial military contexts in which white authorities struggled to understand and thus label Black family and domestic relationships.[38] This dynamic was also similar to apartheid South Africa, where officials responsible for township housing ignored "questions of love, intimacy or emotional compatibility," simply seeking to shore up Black marriages and thus the social order by designating peri-urban housing solely for married couples.[39] Similarly, the Dutch Reformed Church shared this sense of urgency, viewing "Bantu marriages [as] one of the most important social problems in South Africa today."[40]

White officers at Buffalo saw themselves as both soldiers and social workers. Like apartheid authorities in urban South Africa, Nel undertook the design and construction of the kimbo as a Black township for married soldiers and their families. The management of Black women and children remained central to white military authorities throughout 32 Battalion's existence. In an assessment of the unit's Black troops in July 1978, Buffalo's base commander reported to Nel that "we all would like to see that each man has a wife."[41] As the driver of the kimbo's development, Nel felt compelled to formalize — even socially engineer — the domestic lives of 32 Battalion soldiers and their families. He pursued this aim through insidious means.

Nel drew on a variety of tools as he formalized relationships between Angolan soldiers and women. Shortly after arriving at Buffalo, and as a precursor to his most intrusive intervention, he initiated family planning programs that established which women did and did not belong at the base — and, in the crudest terms, to whom — while also identifying which soldiers required treatment for syphilis.[42] Without regard for the dynamics of Black soldiers and their families, Nel took his interventionist approach to establishing social order through the management of community and family life to a new extent by coercing Black couples into a mass wedding. He instructed single Black soldiers to deposit four months of their wages and travel to Rundu to "find" a wife over the course of five days. If unsuccessful in "finding" a wife, upon return the soldier would not only lose the wages that served as collateral but also face severe flogging.[43] Perversely, Nel remembered with fondness and humor the mandatory 1978 mass wedding of over 350 couples:

> I went to [the kimbo] and I had all those women … and I told them … only I'm going to marry them, and the only one that can divorce them, is myself, nobody else. They believed me … I got … a Portuguese-speaking *padre* [priest], and I had the local magistrate from Rundu… . According to law, I couldn't marry them, but they didn't know that … So I did all the talking, the padre did the sermon, and he just said: "You're married" … They believed that I married them and up [until] today I haven't divorced a single one of them because they never asked me [laughs].[44]

[37]HPRA, "Missing Voices" Oral History Project, 2004–12, A3079, B.1.1, Gert Nel, interview by Angela McIntyre, Centurion, Oct. 2005, transcript and recording.

[38]Moyd, "Making the Household," 67.

[39]Posel, "Marriage," 67.

[40]*Ibid*., 64.

[41]Our translation from Afrikaans: "Ons sou graag almal wou sien dat elke man 'n vrou het." DODDC, 32 Bn, box 41, folder 32, BN/309/1/ALG, 8/6/77 to 28/10/80, Spesifieke Operasies: Gesamentlik, "Persoonlike verslag aan bev 32 BN deur Bev Buffalo Basis," 14.

[42]DODDC, 32 Bn, box 9, LOG/OPS/3/16/8, vol. 1, Medies en gesondheid (Verslae, aanvrae, ens), "Medical Report Buffalo [29] April [1977]," 2.

[43]Interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, 13 Feb. 2020; interview by two of the authors, North West, 14 Mar. 2020. In our interviews and across various sources, we have heard slightly different versions of this story, with some accounts instead suggesting soldiers had a week to find a wife in Rundu, and lost five months of wages if they failed to do so. Consider "Legacy Conversations - Maj J Apolinaro - 32 Bn Portuguese Officer & Project Dignidade Updates," interview by Koos Kotzé, YouTube, 29 July 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mRtfeED1edQ&t=3650s; Will Gordon, "Forged in Battle? A Socio-military History of South Africa's 32 Battalion (1975–1993)" (PhD dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 2019), 98–99.

[44]HPRA, B.1.1, Nel.

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In recounting what to him was an amusing episode in the mass wedding, Nel reveals one reason for authorities' interventions into Black family life, namely the paternalistic attitude common among white colonial officers who believed themselves to serve as "fathers" to "their" men and families.[45] Even today, members of the 32 Battalion community share that some white officers still refer to them as their "children" or "grandchildren." As Charles van Onselen highlights, the very notion of being a "father" is "inextricably bound up with the idea of patriarchy" and was used by white South Africans to rationalize their violence against Black workers.[46] This attitude was the militarized expression or equivalent of *baaskap*, or extreme white paternalism. In one interview, a woman who married her husband for a second time during the mass marriage ceremony recounted Nel stating, "All my daughters and all my sons must get married." When asked how she felt about Nel's paternalism, she replied, "We were under his control, under his power. We had nothing to say... It was a difficult time."[47] The mass marriage constituted one of many racialized, paternalistic fantasies imposed by white officers against Black soldiers and families who, as refugees nominally safeguarded by the apartheid SADF, had little space to resist and few, if any, other material opportunities.[48]

One wife of a white officer present at Buffalo at the time claimed that the mass wedding was necessary to resolve infighting between Black soldiers amid a flurry of allegations of infidelity among soldiers' wives and girlfriends while troops were deployed.[49] This was a matter of grave concern for white authorities. In his July 1978 report to Nel, the Buffalo base commander expressed an anxiety that "the average woman's morals are low and this is a big problem in the presence of the abundance of men."[50] For white authorities, the marriages were a form of rectifying disorder among Black troops and their families, in a context wherein "whites believed blacks to be a potential source of disorder capable of destroying 'normality.'"[51] Such motivation also echoes that of British military officials who, as Timothy Parsons points out, "tended to blame African unrest on problems over women" rather than, for instance, combat-related stress and anxiety.[52] Some Black former soldiers agreed, at least partially, that conflicts over women were a serious issue. One former soldier recounted that "there were some people even killing each other because of women" but maintained that such incidents were the result of stress and insufficient leave.[53]

Among white authorities there was also a racist desire to impose domestic order shaped by apartheid social engineering and norms. As Nel explained, he ordered the mass wedding to stop "adultery" and "polygamy," and to regularize inheritance and child custody issues:

> I told them, this nonsense of… one [soldier] moving in [with a woman] and the other one moving out, stop[s] now. They now have to legally… marry the women… If they get shot or something like that, who is going to get their money or their whatever?… [And] who's responsible for whose children?[54]

[45]David Killingray, "Gender Issues and African Colonial Armies," in Killingray and Omissi, *Guardians of Empire*, 225.

[46]Charles van Onselen, "The Social and Economic Underpinning of Paternalism and Violence on the Maize Farms of the South-Western Transvaal, 1900–1950," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 5, no. 2 (1992): 134.

[47]Interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 18 Feb. 2020.

[48]This was accompanied by other humiliating practices, such as the demand that soldiers ritually wash their hands prior to payment: Lennart Bolliger, *Apartheid's Black Soldiers: Un-national Wars and Militaries in Southern Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2021), 111.

[49]Interview by one of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 20 Dec. 2022.

[50]Our translation from Afrikaans: "Die gemiddelde vrou se sedes is laag en dit is 'n groot probleem in die teenwoordigheid van die oorvloed mans." DODDC, 32 Bn, box 41, 309/1/ALG, vol. 1, Spesifieke Operasies: Gesamentlik, "Persoonlike verslag aan bev 32 BN deur Bev Buffalo Basis," 14.

[51]Interview by one of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 20 Dec. 2022. Quote from Rob Gordon, "The Voodoo Ethnologists of Omega," *South African Historical Journal* 72, no. 3 (2020): 390.

[52]Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 160.

[53]Interview by one of the authors, Northern Cape, 27 May 2016.

[54]HPRA, B.1.1, Nel.

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Nel's aims aligned with broader racist anxieties about informal or unstable African marriages as a motivator of social disorder. Writing about apartheid South Africa, Deborah Posel notes that "political concern about the precariousness of African marriage (particularly in the cities) and its deleterious effect on communal order and economic productivity was long standing."[55] This anxiety over Black domestic life and marriage remained core to broader practices and policies of apartheid rule.

In 1978, the SADF's war in Angola began intensifying and white officers increasingly feared defections from 32 Battalion, prompting official interventions into Black family and domestic life.[56] Several interviewees and community members postulated that the coerced marriages were designed to discourage defection or protest as soldiers now had formal dependents who often lacked other survival means. The imperative to marry and the mass wedding blended loyalty to the unit with devotion to family and dependents. In other words, for white authorities, enforcing military discipline among Black troops was intrinsically tied to enforcing family and sexual discipline.[57]

Three nodes of control: ops room, regimental police, and kimbo card

Taking over the unit in 1977, Nel instituted three elements of social control within the Black community. He harnessed two preexisting military authorities — the Operations (Ops) Room and the Regimental Police (RP) — while spearheading the creation of a new tool of population management, the kimbo card.

Headed by 32 Battalion's commanding officer, the Ops Room was the administrative and bureaucratic center of Buffalo. In coordination with the unit's headquarters in Rundu, the Ops Room dealt with a range of issues, including soldiers' pay, recruitment, training, housing, transport, and troops gone AWOL ("absent without official leave"). In contrast to all-white SADF units, the Ops Room also directly dealt with Black troops' conjugal and family matters to manage and regulate community life at Buffalo. One white former officer of 32 Battalion reveals the abuse of power of the Ops Room as well as officers' misogynistic attitudes toward women and racist paternalism toward Black troops:

> You'd go to the Ops Room, and there would be guys whose wives had been whoring around. So, you'd have the whore, her husband, and the guy she'd been whoring with. And they'd have the three of them in the Ops Room, and they would discuss it and the OC [Officer Commanding] would say, "Ok, the whore gets six slashes with the *sjambok* [a rawhide whip], and the guy whose wife it is gets three slashes, he should be looking after his wife, and the guy that was whoring around with her he gets six slashes."[58]

As this account indicates, the Ops Room expected Black soldiers at Buffalo to maintain patriarchal control over their households and were punished for their partners' "misconduct." Here, ideas of paternalism and masculinity intersected. As Keith Breckenridge writes with regard to white workers physically assaulting Black miners in the South African gold mines, "Violence underground served to teach, but it simultaneously manufactured a racialised masculine hierarchy."[59] It is likely that, as Ruth Ginio argues in the case of colonial authorities in French West Africa, 32 Battalion's white leadership

[55]Deborah Posel, "The Apartheid Project, 1948–1970," in *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, vol. 2, *1885–1994*, ed. Robert Ross, Anne Kelk Mager, and Bill Nasson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 357.

[56]DODDC, 32 Bn, box 50, 107/2/3 (SP), Ontslag: SP lede, "32 BN/107/2/3(SP)," 1–2. In fact, during this time, a nearby unit, the 31 Battalion was tasked with monitoring the areas near Buffalo for defectors: interview by one of the authors, Free State, South Africa, 2 May 2023.

[57]Compare Myna Trustram, *Women of the Regiment: Marriage and the Victorian Army* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 196.

[58]HPRA, "Missing Voices" Oral History Project, 2004–12, A3079, D.16, Peter Williams, interview by Mike Cadman, Durban, 15 Feb. 2008, transcript and recording.

[59]Keith Breckenridge, "The Allure of Violence: Men, Race and Masculinity on the South African Goldmines, 1900–1950," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 4 (1998): 682.

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also considered "the loss of African men's control over women… as an indication of the deterioration of its own authority," and thus a threat.[60]

The RP served as the enforcement arm of the Ops Room, consisting of both white officers and Black troops. The RP also had their own office and holding cells. As in the rest of the SADF, members of the RP were not part of the military police corps but recruited from within the unit. Their primary role was to discipline troops, usually through incarceration or punishment exercises.[61] At Buffalo, the RP also served as the police force in the kimbo, where its members, on their discretion, frequently resorted to the use of the sjambok on people who contravened Ops Room instructions and regulations.

Kimbo residents generally disliked the RP and referred to its Black members as *bufos* (snitches). One interviewee compared it to the brutal Portuguese colonial police in Angola, *Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado* (PIDE).[62] The RP's holding cells were referred to as Lusaka, the nickname of the highest-ranking Black member of the RP. Both the Ops Room and the RP used corporal punishment to subjugate Black soldiers to white soldiers, Black troops to Black officers, women to men, and children to adults. Mirroring the system of indirect rule, Black officers therefore acted as "violent intermediaries" who carried out corporal punishment of Black troops and civilians in the Ops Room.[63]

Women lived at the mercy of the RP. One Black former soldier recounted that whenever one specific white officer of the RP caught a woman having sex with a man who was not her "husband," he would ask her whether she liked the man she was with. If the woman — feeling scared and confused — answered yes, then members of the RP would escort her husband to the company lines and force the single man to move in with her, thus effectively "divorcing" and "remarrying" couples on a whim.[64] A power unto itself, the RP offered one, often brutal and arbitrary, means for authorities to exert power and quell their anxieties about African marriages.[65]

At Buffalo, these anxieties were reconciled in the kimbo card, a logbook-like register of all officially approved people living in the kimbo, akin to the apartheid government's population register in South Africa.[66] All people traveling to Buffalo first had to report to military authorities in Rundu, where their personal details would be checked against the official register. When arriving at Buffalo, newcomers and those returning from leave had to report to the Ops Room. The kimbo card also recorded births, deaths, marriages, and divorces. Like the population register, the kimbo card served as "an instrument of policing" aimed to survey and control people's movement to and from Buffalo.[67]

As a means of influx control and social monitoring, the kimbo card, like its equivalents in apartheid South Africa, hit unmarried Black women most severely by making them dependent on men for security of tenure.[68] Once a soldier had "found a woman," he could designate her as his wife by simply listing her accordingly on the kimbo card.[69] Conversely, it was relatively easy for men to divorce and

[60] Ginio, "'Cherchez la femme,'" 49.

[61] Peter Dickens, "A Red Helmet That Spelt 'Afkak,'" *Observation Post* (blog), 5 Jan. 2022, https://samilhistory.com/2019/01/05/a-red-helmet-that-spelt-afkak/.

[62] Interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, 13 Feb. 2020.

[63] We take the concept of "violent intermediaries" from Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, and the idea of "indirect rule" within the SADF from Gordon, "The Voodoo Ethnologists of Omega," 390.

[64] Interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, 13 Feb. 2020.

[65] DODDC, 32 Bn, box 9, LOG/OPS/3/16/8, vol. 1, Medies en gesondheid (Verslae, aanvrae, ens), "Medical Report Buffalo April [29, 1977]", 2; Posel, "The Apartheid Project, 1948–1970," 358.

[66] Keith Breckenridge, "Verwoerd's Bureau of Proof: Total Information in the Making of Apartheid," in *History Workshop Journal*, no. 59 (Spring 2005): 83–108; Lorena Rizzo, "Visual Impersonation—Population Registration, Reference Books and Identification in the Eastern Cape, 1950s–1960s," *History in Africa* 41 (2014): 221–48.

[67] Keith Breckenridge, "The Book of Life: The South African Population Register and the Invention of Racial Descent, 1950–1980," *Kronos* 40, no. 1 (2014): 225–40.

[68] Posel, "The Apartheid Project, 1948–1970," 358.

[69] Interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, 13 Feb. 2020.

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thus remove their wives from their kimbo cards. In at least one instance, it was as simple as leaving one's wife and children in Rundu while on leave.[70] This laissez-faire approach differed from the French colonial army in West Africa, where women underwent a "morality investigation," as well as from the British King's African Rifles, where women had to be "endorsed" by different officers "to ensure [a woman] was healthy and of good character," but not necessarily married to a Black soldier.[71]

In contrast to Nel's efforts to formalize soldiers' relations with women, most other white officers appear to have cared little, if at all, about the exact conjugal status of women at Buffalo; they just had to be registered on the kimbo card.[72] In other words, the SADF's priority was controlling the movement of people, especially women, in and out of Buffalo.[73] Full control, however, was never achieved. In 1980, for instance, the SADF tried to remove "squatters" from the kimbo but, as Piet Nortje writes, "every time Sergeant Major Carl Roza tried to carry out a census, the illegal residents [likely referring to people not registered on the kimbo card] simply hid in the bush until the count was over."[74] While white officers framed the kimbo card as a military necessity, in practice it was as much about their fantasies of racial and martial order. The authority of the kimbo card was never complete, but subject both to the degree of interest in the tool's implementation by white officers as well as the maneuvering of Black community members.

32 Battalion differed from almost all apartheid security forces in its inclusion of women and children in its military community. This led to concerns and conflicts among both Black troops and white officers. The latter drew on a racist lexicon of paternalism fused with the imperatives of counterinsurgency to act on these communities and especially women to resolve these issues while bolstering their own racial consciousness and racist fantasies. Nel took on the role of paternalistic steward, as a "father" to the community, by coercing marriages and using a three-pronged apparatus of social control managed through the Ops Room, carried out by the RP, and institutionalized in the kimbo card. In practice and policy, the history of 32 Battalion is inseparable from the history of the 32 Battalion families.

"The kimbo is the heart of the unit": block leaders, social control, and community life

Women were not only central objects of military officers' designs but also key actors in forging and maintaining the social relations and hierarchy underpinning the military. In addition, women, like soldiers, entered Buffalo from an array of ethno-linguistic, geographic, national, and class backgrounds which they had to navigate in developing community life and social order. This is not altogether unique, as Zimmerman writes of the West African forces in the French colonial army: "African military households depended on each other and created fictive kin relationships within their regiments. The military allocated resources to them, which fueled these relationships and made these households reliant on the colonial state."[75] In the 32 Battalion community, men were often deployed for weeks and even months, and in their absence, the community required Black women to become direct intermediaries with the white officer class. This was mutually recognized by white officers who thought "the Kimbo is the heart of the unit" and viewed women as the heart of the kimbo.[76]

Because white officers took note of the importance of women in the functioning of the military, some women at Buffalo officially served in the SADF as teachers and nurses, two of the primary

[70] DODDC, 32 Bn Gp 2, box 61, 106/22/5/5 (SP), vol. 3, Births & Deaths and Kimbo Census, "G3/P (SP): 177."

[71] Mann, *Native Sons*, 177–78; Ginio, "'Cherchez la femme,'" 43–44; Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 151.

[72] This situation was akin to that of the King's African Rifles: Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File*, 147.

[73] Compare Lovering, "Authority and Identity," 233.

[74] Nortje, *32 Battalion*, 57.

[75] Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage*, 50.

[76] DODDC, 32 Bn Gp 2, box 260, 522/1, vol. 1, Konferensies, Kongresse, Seminare, Simposiums en Vergaderings / Konferensies, "Minutes of Officer Commanding conference held on 15 Sep 83 at Buffalo training base," 8.

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fields of employment for Black women in South Africa and Namibia.[77] For these women, the military offered an institutional means to social mobility, autonomy, and purpose. The same held true for women who served in informal leadership roles within the military community, often the wives of Black troops with rank — some of whom had been *assimilados* — called upon by white officers to help manage and maintain community life. This dynamic took on several different inflections.

The third OC of 32 Battalion, Deon Ferreira, instituted regular meetings with "kimbo women," designed to address community concerns. For authorities, the meetings were intended "to achieve satisfaction between the residents of the Kimbo" and to offer "an opportunity… to bring up problems and new proposals."[78] In 1980, Eddie Viljoen, who would later serve as the unit's fourth OC, facilitated some of these meetings.[79] At these meetings, women community representatives and white authorities discussed many issues, most of which were quotidian in nature, ranging from complaints over products stocked at the community shop to immunization campaigns to issues of hygiene — even sewing and baking competitions. This practice continued throughout the unit's tenure at Buffalo until at least its relocation to South Africa in 1989. While white authorities viewed community and family management as key to military success, they also struggled to maintain a rapport with women at Buffalo. One exasperated white officer lamented, "I mentioned to the women that if I don't get more cooperation from [them], I won't do anything extra for them."[80]

The military incentivized community leadership and representation among Black women married to favored soldiers. Hence, the rewards and incentives of military rank became mirrored among Black women. Beginning under Nel, twice annually the SADF flew a cohort of Black women to Windhoek for a shopping trip, often accompanied by the wives of white officers. One white woman fondly remembered eating "too much ice cream" during one of these trips.[81] In 1985, seventy women — roughly 10 percent of the community — traveled to Windhoek to purchase fashionable clothing in preparation for that year's color parade, a ritual celebrating the unit.[82]

For the military, these shopping trips and consumer practices emphasized the community's relative purchasing and consumer power as well as middle-class status, itself inseparable from the military. Other Angolan refugee communities in the region viewed the 32 Battalion community as wealthy.[83] For instance, unlike their Black northern Namibian civilian neighbors, women at Buffalo could order consumer items through the military directly from South Africa.[84] In 1980, women even launched complaints that the clothes sold at the community store were "too old-fashioned."[85] Elite women became agents and symbols of the community's class structure as the army offered such consumer opportunities to at most seventy women while a select few participated in weekly meetings with officers.

[77] Meghan Healy-Clancy, "Women and Apartheid," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, 28 June 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.184.

[78] Our translation from Afrikaans: "Die doel van hierdie vergadering is om te poog am tevredenheid te bewerkstellig tussen die inwoners van die Kimbo. 'n geleentheid word aangebied om met probleme on nuwe voorstelle voor 'n dag te kom." DODDC, 32 Bn Gp 2, box 156, 522/1, Konferensies, "406/12/5 - Weeklikse algemene vergadering met Kimbo vroue [10 Apr. 1980]," 1.

[79] *Ibid*., 3.

[80] Our translation from Afrikaans: "Ek het aan die vroue genoem dat indien ek nie meer samewerking vanaf die vroue se kant af kry nie, ek niks ekstra vir hulle sal doen nie." DODDC, 32 Bn Gp 2, box 156, 522/1, Konferensies, "522/1/1 (Kimbo) - Notule van algemene vroue vergadering gehou op 19 Julie 1980 te Kimbo," 2.

[81] Interview by one of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 20 Dec. 2022.

[82] DODDC, 32 Bn Gp 2, box 156, 522/1, Konferensies, "Minutes of meeting held on the 8th August 1985 with Kimbo women at Buffalo training base," 1. The figure is from the 1989 census: DODDC, 32 Bn Gp 2, box 61, 107/1/1, vol. 1, Versekering / Assuransie: Groepsversekering, "106/22/5/SP," 1.

[83] Interview by one of the authors, Namibia, 15 Jan. 2023.

[84] Interview by one of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 2 Feb. 2023.

[85] Our translation from Afrikaans: "te oud modeus." DODDC, 32 Bn Gp 2, box 156, 522/1, Konferensies, "522/1/1 (Kimbo) - Notule van algemene vroue vergadering gehou op 19 Julie 1980 te Kimbo," 2.

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Daily life in the kimbo again took on the valences of military hierarchy, logic, and organization. Select women, again usually married to Black officers and identified by white women social workers and wives of white authorities, became *chefes da zona* (zone or block leaders).[86] These block leaders (two for each block, forty in total) served as military intermediaries, carrying out tasks and designs to manage community life. They served as the SADF's eyes and ears in the community. Charged with keeping their neighbors in line, they served a role similar to officers' wives or "head women" in other colonial militaries.[87] First, they led and implemented hygiene and cleanliness campaigns — a chief concern for the military. Second, they surveilled their neighbors and could report them directly to the Ops Room, where they would face further interrogation and reprimand. Mirroring wider colonial and apartheid practices of divide and rule, these women were placed in positions of relative privilege and power which they wielded toward their personal, familial, and communal interests.

As a boy and temporary war orphan, one of the authors was adopted by a family at Buffalo. After two years at the base, a friend of his adoptive mother accused her of witchcraft, forcing her to flee the community. The accusation was that his adoptive mother wielded a catalog featuring community members' names, some of whom had died, and that she used the catalog to curse or murder those named in it.[88] Quickly, a mob formed around the author's adoptive home as vigilantism was rampant on matters such as witchcraft accusations. These allegations were first escalated to a block leader who then took the matter to the Ops Room. At the time, it became clear that his adoptive mother would be required to flee the community for her own safety while her husband, his adoptive father, was flogged and forced to make a difficult decision: to divorce his wife and remain a soldier, thus maintaining an income, or to flee with her to Rundu and lose his income. He chose the former. Conversely, the efforts and creativity of another woman, herself a block leader, enabled the author, a mere boy at the time, to remain in the community. As the mob formed, this block leader acted quickly, and removed the author from the home and out of harm's way.

Meanwhile, the author remained vulnerable since he was listed on the kimbo card of a family besieged by accusations of witchcraft, threatened by vigilante violence, and facing dispersal. Fortunately, the block leader who had taken a keen interest in him bravely marched to the Ops Room to advocate on his behalf and worked with the white officers so he could remain at Buffalo. She first tried to adopt him, but since her husband was deployed at the time, he was unable to add a son to his kimbo card. Together with the Ops Room staff, the woman then improvised arrangements with her sister-in-law and her soon-to-be husband to register him on the soldier's kimbo card.[89]

Much like spouses of soldiers in other colonial militaries, women at Buffalo, especially block leaders, creatively melded the military's regulatory scaffolding, social infrastructure, and norms to improve the lives of themselves, loved ones, and, in this instance, vulnerable community members by drawing on and extending formalized relationships of kinship.[90] While the kimbo card was a tool of

[86]Interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 13 Sep. 2022. Interview by one of the authors, Western Cape, South Africa, 15 Sep. 2023. We have been unable to identify a formal title for this role employed by the SADF but it is unlikely that white authorities used this Portuguese term. The connection between the position of women in military communities and the role of their husbands is not unique to 32 Battalion. Consider Moyd, "Gender and Violence," 196.

[87]A. Haywood and F. A. S. Clarke, *The History of the Royal West African Frontier Force* (Aldershot: Gale & Polden, 1964), 316–17; Anthony Clayton and David Killingray, *Khaki and Blue: Military and Police in British Colonial Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989), 188; Parsons, "All *Askaris* Are," 172–73.

[88]*O catálogo*, or "the catalog," refers to a witchcraft allegation at Buffalo grounded in a purported document or catalog listing the names of living community members targeted for a curse alongside the names of deceased people. The catalog was widely feared, but its origins are tied to the community's geography. As Buffalo was an enclosed environment with the nearest town, Rundu, about 250 kilometers away, through mail-order catalogs, a person could get almost anything, including clothes, shoes, and household goods, as well as potions promising love and luck. Eventually the catalog took on the valence of a curse in the community.

[89]Years later, though the author reconnected with his parents, siblings and loved ones who remained in Angola, he continues to cherish these relationships too.

[90]Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage*, 134.

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social control that linked personal and family survival to military bureaucracy, it was never totalizing. In moments of crisis, block leaders, such as the one described above, were able to hack the base's regulations in the favor and toward the survival of vulnerable people such as the author.

Some women embraced their role as block leaders. They were motivated by emotional attachment to their husbands, ideological beliefs, a desire to reassert themselves in Angola, and their relative authority and class position. As the "army in the shadows," their dedication to the military and its mission both at the time and today appears cemented among some women as core to their very self-image.[91] However, this commitment was undergirded by a broader precariousness that characterized the lives of Black women at Buffalo.

"A man is never your family": women's precariousness and labor

With men deployed for weeks and even months, women became the leading actors in community social life. Like in other military communities, women performed unrecognized domestic and emotional labor while also creating informal economic opportunities for themselves. They supported each other emotionally when loved ones were deployed or returned in a casket, they shared resources as friends and neighbors, and they supported the child-rearing of the community's children. Their roles often bridged social and economic imperatives. Women took up entrepreneurial opportunities to generate social spaces through home-brewed alcohol — for which they were severely punished by flogging — as well as through other activities like developing community cinemas. Women also traveled to Angola to purchase necessities such as clothing or alcohol to sell while also likely carrying with them messages for loved ones remaining in the country. While men were relegated to counterinsurgent warfare, women became some of the most mobile community members, often serving as informal intermediaries with other communities or sojourning beyond the base to consult with traditional healers. Part of their mobility was also enabled by the very maintenance of daily life through the collection of water and firewood. However, this relative mobility was nevertheless tied to their precarious positions. Economic activities facilitated by mobility were often required to ameliorate such precariousness.[92]

Other than block leaders and a few favored individual women, most women at Buffalo led precarious lives. Much like their Black counterparts in urban South Africa, single women were generally not permitted to stay at Buffalo, meaning that divorced women or war widows had to leave the base.[93] There were rare exceptions. In select cases, a woman's networks and labor value could enable a degree of security of tenure. One woman separated from the soldier who brought her to Buffalo five years prior because he drank too much and beat her. Her former husband was discharged from the unit, but she was permitted to stay after some officers advocated for her, arguing that she was a good teacher.[94] In some instances, class and skill enabled women to remain. One Coloured woman, estranged from her husband, was actively recruited by the authorities to work as a schoolteacher.[95] Similarly, one nurse continued to work at Buffalo after her husband left her, while one Black officer's aunt, a widow, remained as a baker.[96] These cases were the exception rather than the rule: by 1989, there were officially only fourteen widows resident on base.[97]

[91] Interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 13 Sep. 13, 2022. This claim is very similar to the arguments by their male counterparts who today also seek recognition as heroes and contributors to South Africa's national history and liberation story: Raber, "'In the Eyes", ch. 2.

[92] Interview by one of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 31 Jan. 2023; interview by two of the authors, North West, South Africa, 14 Mar. 2020.

[93] Posel, "Marriage," 68–69.

[94] HPRA, B.1.45, Meriam Nainda,.

[95] DODDC, 32 Bn, box 9, LOG/OPS/3/16/13/4, vol. 1, Portugese/Ang'e, "3/16/13/4," 3.

[96] *Ibid.*; interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 13 Sep. 2022.

[97] DODDC, 32 Bn Gp 2, box 61, 107/1/1, vol. 1, Versekering / Assuransie: Groepsversekering, "106/22/5/SP," 1.

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Some women were able to use instruments of social control in their favor. The Ops Room regularly intervened in domestic disputes and violence, sometimes after women reported their husbands.[98] Typically, officers in the Ops Room would decide which party was at fault and subject them to floggings. In some cases, the Ops Room decided to put both people in the holding cells at Lusaka for up to a week until they "made peace."[99] Unsurprisingly, this discouraged women from taking their issues to the dreaded Ops Room. However, in rare instances, officers supported women leaving abusive relationships.[100]

More generally, women's position in the military hierarchy at Buffalo left them incredibly vulnerable. It was easy for soldiers to separate from their partners, and therefore also common for troops to change partners, especially in cases where they were not formally married and their "wife" would simply be taken off their kimbo card and thus banished from the community.[101] According to one woman, if a soldier no longer liked his partner, he could just send her to Rundu.[102] This was the case for one woman whose husband wanted to separate because he wanted to marry someone else. He simply told his company commander, who in turn informed the Ops Room, and the woman was forced to move to Rundu.[103] In another case, after one woman's parents divorced at Buffalo, her mother also had to return to Rundu. With this new financial instability and to guarantee her children's continued access to school, her mother temporarily housed this woman and her siblings with other families at the kimbo, only taking her youngest child to Rundu. Her mother had no friends or relatives in Rundu and soon married another soldier in order "to survive" and return to Buffalo.[104] Her decision followed a broader pattern of some divorcées and widows actively seeking marriage to another soldier to secure their ability to remain in the community.[105] Knowing this, some soldiers made dramatic marriage proposals to single women as they boarded military trucks destined for Rundu.[106]

While marrying a soldier secured a woman's tenure at Buffalo, it often came at a cost.[107] Women's precariousness, compounded by a patriarchal SADF governing institution, led to a culture of near impunity for sexual and gender-based violence. One woman recounted a particularly tragic story involving one of her neighbors in the kimbo. The woman's husband regularly beat her until the RP put him in Lusaka, where he died for unknown reasons. She, too, was forced to leave Buffalo and return to Rundu.[108] Two women interviewees recounted that multiple women were raped by men whose only punishment was to be discharged from the unit.[109] In late 1987, a former 32 Battalion member who had been sentenced to five years imprisonment for rape applied for reenlistment. The unit's leadership considered his application favorably but asked for advice from the Office of the Chief of the Army whether the member may be reenlisted.[110] (The archival record does not indicate whether he was reenlisted.) In another instance, one soldier with a deep penchant for violence was effectively insulated from accountability due to his military reputation. One woman explained how the man beat

[98]This is akin to other colonial militaries: Moyd, *Violent Intermediaries*, 156; Zimmerman, *Militarizing Marriage*, 132.

[99]Interview by two of the authors, North West, South Africa, 14 Mar. 2020.

[100]Interview by one of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 2 Feb. 2023.

[101]Interview by two of the authors, North West, South Africa, 13 Feb. 2020; interview by two of the authors, North West, South Africa, 13 Feb. 2020.

[102]Interview by two of the authors, North West, South Africa, 14 Mar. 2020.

[103]Interview by two of the authors, North West, South Africa, 21 Feb. 2020.

[104]Interview by two of the authors, North West, South Africa, 13 Feb. 2020.

[105]Interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 18 Feb. 2020.

[106]Interview by two of the authors, North West, South Africa, 14 Mar. 2020.

[107]Firmino, "Rewriting History"; interview by one of the authors, Western Cape, South Africa, 15 Sep. 2023.

[108]Interview by two of the authors, North West, South Africa, 21 Feb. 2020.

[109]Interview by one of the authors, North West, South Africa, 13 Feb. 2020; interview by one of the authors, North West, South Africa, 23 Feb. 2020.

[110]Gordon, "Forged in Battle?," 167.

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his wife blind while the community remained too scared and shocked to intervene. Insidiously, his blinded wife was relegated to living with her abuser even as he married a second wife.[111]

Gender-based violence took on a central place in the community's culture. Individuals gained reputations for violence, and Teresa Kutala Firmino, an artist and daughter of a 32 Battalion soldier, notes, "The stories and memories of the violence still haunt the community to this day."[112] These experiences are encapsulated in a phrase common among women in the kimbo: "Um homem nunca é sua família" ("A man is never your family").[113] While women at Buffalo forged communal and social life, with a few managing to gain relative authority and privilege tied to the military, for the vast majority, life was precarious.

Conclusion

Like their counterparts in other colonial militaries, white officers at Buffalo were anxious to exert control over the domestic and family lives of Black troops. They viewed themselves not only as military men but as father figures and social workers — a racist and paternalistic attitude endemic to colonial and apartheid rule. Their highly interventionist approach also meant bending moral and even legal codes to their will. Emerging amid a deep gender imbalance, the founding OC — counter to apartheid legislation — founded a brothel staffed by Black and mixed-race women and patronized by white troops. His successor, a career bureaucrat, then tried to formalize and "civilize" Black family life through coercion and a mass wedding. Throughout the unit's history, white officers viewed the lives of Black women and children as a key source of possible disorder. In attempting to manage Black community life, the authorities instituted a three-pronged apparatus of control: the kimbo card, an analog to influx control regulations in South Africa; a feared and ill-reputed police force; and an Ops Room that served as the command center for population management. However, women at Buffalo did not simply "respond" to these measures but, within the limits of their circumstances, made lives for themselves and their families.

In Buffalo's operations, the apartheid military suspended or upended its very norms and expectations by directly engaging and hiring Black Angolan women. Practically speaking, the authorities recognized that their attempts to formalize domestic life would always be the rubber that meets the road: in order to make their tools of surveillance and social regulation work, they would need to accept some degree of flexibility, the very same flexibility inherent to a community of refugees. In this way, the logic of family and community life shaped the practice of military rule. Elite women were the fulcrum of this social order, with some becoming intermediaries and leaders, even garnering rewards and advantages. However, for most women at Buffalo, the precariousness that brought them from Angola coursed through their lives on base — primarily due to uncertain, tenuous marital arrangements. Still, women became the community's social anchors: they fostered social life, cared for each other, and, as the story of one of us demonstrates, at times reappropriated the very tools used to control them to help the most vulnerable members of the community. At Buffalo, family and community were pliable concepts, molded by the hands of mothers, sisters, and wives.

The SADF was not unique, but part and parcel of a wider history of colonial entanglement and military communities across Africa. By emphasizing similarities between the 32 Battalion military community and its counterparts across Africa, we aim to further challenge the supposed exceptionalism of the SADF and South African colonial history, more broadly. Likewise, in situating the contours of life at Buffalo, a seemingly far flung SADF base, within wider apartheid rule, we bridge colony (Namibia) and metropole (apartheid South Africa) while remaining attuned to the unique imperatives of an improvised, frontline military community. In doing so, we aim to further demystify the apartheid military and its most mythologized unit, 32 Battalion. Beyond these two historiographical

[111] Interview by two of the authors, Gauteng, South Africa, 13 Sep. 2022.
[112] Firmino, "Rewriting History," 81.
[113] *Ibid.*, 39.

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interventions, our methodological and archival pluralism has allowed us to foreground the dynamics of coercion and consent — in our case, between white officers and Black Angolan women — that characterize the development and functioning of military communities. Hence, illuminating the experiences of Black women and their interactions with white authorities offers vivid insights not only into the specifics of domestic and communal life at Buffalo but, equally importantly, into the gendered mechanics of colonial military rule.

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