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Keeping Faith With the Dead

Liberation War and Victimhood in Zimbabwe

Liberation war heritage has, in post-colonial states, been deployed to justify the present. In this paper I reflect on how cultural heritage of the liberation war in Zimbabwe has been monopolized by the current ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) party, resulting in the creation of anger, disintegration, tension, resentment and enmity rather than social cohesion and reconciliation needed in Zimbabwe. Currently, the signification of memorialization practices and politics of remembering fallen heroes - *keeping faith with the dead* - has become a contested phenomenon.¹ ZANU PF, a former liberation struggle movement, frames the tragic events of the war in a form that legitimates its rule and justifies its actions, while delegitimizing its perceived enemies.

Zimbabwe was born on 17 April 1980 after a protracted war of liberation. Before independence, it was called Southern Rhodesia after Cecil John Rhodes (1853-1902), the leader of the Pioneer Column. From the 1950s to the 1960s, local resistance against colonial rule increased, leading the United Nations and Britain to consider the concerns of the local people. However, in 1964 Ian Smith (1919-2007), who was the leader of the colonial government at the time, wanted to intensify white minority rule over majority indigenous people. He requested the British government to grant his party, the Rhodesian Front, independence on the basis of minority rule. Meeting a flat refusal on this issue, he proceeded to proclaim a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) on 11 November 1965. The nationalists intensified the armed struggle. Many fighters were maimed and killed. War camps in and outside the country were bombed. This resulted in the

Lancaster House Conference in London in 1979. The conference led to the elections in 1980 which were won by Robert Mugabe (1924-).

The war has become a cultural heritage, understood here as things both tangible (monuments, memorial sites, objects, buildings, landscapes etc) and intangible (language, values, traditions, oral histories, ideological legacies etc).² Liberation war heritage in Zimbabwe includes all the tangible and intangible features that were produced as a result of colonial encounters between 1890 and 1980. Haunted landscapes, mass graves, battle sites, assembly points, songs, narratives, biographies of nationalists, historic trails, routes, protected villages, detention centres, prisons and transit camps/bases, have been included in the broad comprehension of what constitutes liberation heritage.³

As alluded to above, camps of the liberation war movements were bombed, resulting in the deaths of thousands. Nyadzonya and Chimoio camps in Mozambique bordering Zimbabwe in the East are often mentioned when referring to this tragic experience. The camps belonged to Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) – the military wing of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), currently the ruling party (as ZANU PF), in Zimbabwe.⁴ The camps are not only historical but also sacred heritage-scapes, because they are associated with death, a sacred phenomenon in African religion and as well as by the sacralization process of naming and marking them off, elevation and putting them on display, enshrinement, and reproduction of the sight.⁵ The shrines, occasionally visited by members of the former liberation movements and their sympathizers, function as sacred spaces because the visitors refer to themselves as pilgrims. The approach to the sites is ritualized and the emotional reaction is so "affective" because of the people who perished there; hence the visits are not only commemorative, but also meant to *keep faith with the dead*, through carrying out death rituals at these camps.

The liberation struggle in Zimbabwe was a military conflict; hence, the framing by politicians when commemorating war history and camps bombed during the liberation war focuses on victory and defeat. Commemorations such as the annual "Independence, Heroes and Defence Forces Day" holiday are often only about victory. No commemoration of these days goes by without reference by ruling party politicians, to the liberation war fighters who perished at Chimoio and Nyadzonia camps. Commemorative rituals and sites may function both to draw boundaries

between groups and to integrate them. Cultural heritage attests to the dissonant and conflicting uses and purposes of the past, because the past can be purposely selected, modified and re-appropriated to meet political agendas and ideological frameworks that underpin heritage in the present.⁶ here is a strong feeling amongst many in Zimbabwe, that the ruling ZANU PF regime forms and frames liberation war heritage in a partisan way and ideologically impresses it upon the citizens. It presents cultural heritage as if it is monolithic and static and yet cultural heritage is driven by people's motivations. It is subjective, contextual, dynamic and functional.

The different uses of heritage and its importance to different people for various reasons make it quite inevitable that it has emerged as a major arena of conflict and contestation.⁷ The war heritage in Zimbabwe has become a cause of tension, conflict and violence because the ruling regime has framed and disseminated it in a way that depicts it (the regime) as the real victim of the past. It deploys the state media to broadcast an official and hegemonic understanding of war heritage which serves the regime's interests. This resonates with what Hobsbawm and Ranger call "the invention of tradition."⁸ The regime invokes cultural heritage from the war, tangible and intangible, to indicate its bravery, power, might and that it can command a successful war against opponents. Thus, while Winter argues that, war memorial has a "shelf-life", i.e. there is no permanent meaning ascribed to them, in the Zimbabwean context, there seems to be a coherent and on-going use of these war memorials and history for political advantage and as a tactic to hang on to power.⁹

This creates attitudes, emotions and beliefs, through which the ruling party portrays itself (in-group) as the victim which has suffered more than the opposition political actors (out-group) who are portrayed as enemies and traitors bent on having Zimbabwe recolonized. Thus, anyone who opposes the ruling regime or does not subscribe to its framing of war history is depicted as working with erstwhile colonizers, and therefore should be treated and perceived in the same way colonizers were treated and perceived during the liberation struggle. Opposition forces, made up of people who do not subscribe to the ruling regime's framing of history, however, perceive themselves as victims as well. They claim that they are also victims of the liberation struggle. They have a share, not only in the liberation struggle, but should also enjoy the fruits of the struggle. The fact that they are sidelined and erased from the liberation history doubles their victimhood. They

suffered just like the others during the war, but are suffering again in post-colonial Zimbabwe at the hands of fellow Zimbabweans; thus experiencing a double tragedy. This results in competitive victimhood which is understood as a group's motivation and consequent effort to establish that it has suffered more than its adversaries. Consequently, competitive victimhood engenders and contributes to the conflict's continuation, escalation and the impediment of potential solutions. Victimhood can be direct as in personal suffering of injury or loss, or indirect through witnessing fellow in-group members suffer at the hands of the out-group.¹⁰

Victimhood status has numerous psychological functions. It is a psychological commodity which serves numerous purposes.¹¹ It increases in-group cohesiveness. Leaders need people who view themselves as a group that faces severe injustice; it justifies violence by the in-group: before conflicts take place there is a need for a moral justification that violence is required. This may be done by exaggerating group vulnerability and inflating the threat from the out-group; it can be used to deflect responsibility for the use of violence during the conflict, that the group was left with no option but to resort to violence as a means of self-defense. Accepting responsibility comes with collective guilt and empathy for the out-group and this may be linked to the demands for reparations and it can be used by groups to present and maintain a positive image in the eyes of third parties, for moral and material support. Presenting themselves as victims contributes to sympathy and a positive image of themselves to third parties. Research has shown that groups engaged in competitive victimhood are less willing to forgive the out-group and to abandon retaliation and seek reconciliation.¹²

The competition over victimhood elicits a particular perception of the other, normally a positive image of the in-group and a negative image of the out-group. A partisan approach to the past gives rise to a dissonant heritage.¹³ The opposition forces accuse the ruling regime of monopolizing war cultural heritage, to legitimize its authority and justify its actions, including violence, against the backdrop of decreasing popularity. Consequently, war heritage is causing segregation and negative differentiation resulting in it becoming a negative heritage.¹⁴

Framing is a well-established strategy in political communication. It does not simply exhibit some reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality. It throws something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing

and de-legitimizing alternative versions of reality.¹⁵

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.¹⁶

Cultural heritage is commonly used to stimulate pride in the (imagined) national history or to highlight the virtues of particular ideologies.¹⁷ Heritage is created by interpretation which creates specific messages about the value and meaning of specific heritage places and the past it represents. In other words, the messages conveyed from heritage interpretation do not always find consensus and thus can lead to dissonance. The visual presence of heritage reflected by monuments, buildings and memorials translates powerful ideological messages that are never apolitical and ensures that the messages they convey are open to contested interpretations.¹⁸ The needs of present day Zimbabwe require that cultural heritage be framed and transformed from spaces of war to spaces of peace and reconciliation.

Tilting towards the search for social cohesion and reconciliation in the context of the uses or abuses of the past, I argue that cultural heritage can be sites and spaces of unity, social cohesion, peace and reconciliation, because it is a socially produced and negotiated entity whose meanings vary depending on context over time. The struggle for peace and reconciliation is a struggle for reframing and reconfiguration hostile sites and spaces. Cultural heritage can be re-framed or reconfigured as a reconciliatory memory or as a shared and collective narrative; it can also be an active force in reconciliation, peace building and social and economic development. I have demonstrated that heritage is not affixed and an unchanging entity; it is not intrinsic to objects, places and narratives, but a culturally ascribed and socially constructed practice and process. It is flexible and malleable, often to the needs of those who are in a position of power. Hence, it needs to be constantly re-evaluated and repositioned by social needs, desires, and practices.¹⁹ Thus, I challenge the accentuation of “archaeology of perpetrators” where the process of exposing and describing events and landscapes of atrocity is used to provoke public discourse and explore uncomfortable aspects of history.²⁰ *Keeping faith with the dead* and memories of wrongs suffered should not just be traces or mirrors of the troubling past; they can be catalysts for insight, resistance, social change and doing justice. Lessons undergone in the past

can be used to fight injustice today. Misuse of memory can damage others, hence need to be forestalled or transformed.²¹ If people ‘remember rightly’, cultural heritage and history can be sources of peace and reconciliation.²² The liberation struggle represented in cultural heritage from the war can be transformed from evoking feelings of tension to opportunities of unity, common identity, and history.

Notes

1. cf. David Campton, “Divine and Human: Nurturing a Spirituality and a Culture of Forgiveness.” In *Divided Past: Shared Future. Essays on Churches Addressing the Legacy of the Troubles*, ed. David Campton and Nigel Biggar, (Belfast: Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland, 2008).
2. ICOMOS, *International Cultural Tourism Charter. Principles And Guidelines For Managing Tourism At Places Of Cultural And Heritage Significance*, (ICOMOS: International Cultural Tourism Committee, 2002).
3. Njabulo Chipangura, “The love and hate relationship of colonial heritage; exploring changes in the ‘heritage archive’ of Zimbabwe”, file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/The_love_and_hate_relationship_of_coloni.pdf.
4. ZANU became ZANU PF in 1987 when it merged with the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) led by Joshua Nkomo (1917-1999).
5. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (California: University of California Press, 1999), 45.
6. Hyung yu Park, *Heritage Tourism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 18.
7. Brian Graham, “The uses and abuses of heritage”, in ed. Corsane, Gerad, *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An introductory reader*, (London: Routledge, 2004).
8. Eric J Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions”, in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
9. Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between memory and history in the twentieth century*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 140.
10. Noor et.al, “When Suffering Begets Suffering: The Psychology of Competitive Victimhood Between Adversarial Groups in Violent Conflicts”, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16(4), (2012):351-374.
11. Ibid.
12. N. Shnabel et al, “Overcoming competitive victimhood and facilitating forgiveness through re-categorization into a common victim or perpetrator identity”, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49(5), (2013): 867-877.
13. John Tunbridge, and Gregory Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage*, (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1996).
14. Lynn Meskell, “Negative Heritage and past mastering in Archeology”, *Archeological Quartely*, 75(3), (2002): 557-574.

15. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).
16. Robert, M. Entman, "Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm", *Journal of Communication*, 43(4) (1993): 51-58.
17. Noel, B. Salazah, "The glocalisation of heritage through tourism: Balancing standardisation and differentiation", in *Heritage and Globalisation*, Sophia Labadi and Colin Long eds, (London: Routledge, 2010); Diatram A. Scheufele, and Shanto Iyengar, "The State of Framing Research: A Call for New Directions", <http://pcl.stanford.edu/research/2011/scheufele-framing.pdf> and Butler, Judith, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).
18. Sara McDowell, "Heritage, Memory and Identity", in Brian Graham and Peter Howard (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010).
19. Hyung Yu Park, *Heritage Tourism* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
20. Susan Pollock, "The Royal Cemetery of Ur: Ritual, Tradition, and the Creation of Subjects", in *Representation of Political Power in Times of Change and Dissolving Order*, Marlies Heinz and Marian Feldman (eds.), 89-110. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007).
21. Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Oxford: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006).
22. Ibid.