

“MY BONES SHALL RISE AGAIN”: WAR VETERANS, SPIRITS AND LAND REFORM IN ZIMBABWE¹

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ABSTRACT

The Land Reform program has attracted the attention of many a commentator and has elicited a multiplicity of interpretations, some of which are mutually exclusive of each other. It is however not an overstatement to say that by and large, the exercise has been politicised, that is, those who have either justified or criticised the program have done so on political and economic grounds. The relationship between land and indigenous religion has not been sufficiently developed. This paper seeks to explore this relationship through activities of reburial of fallen heroes spearheaded by war veterans² in Zimbabwe. It argues that reburial activities reflect Zimbabwe's appropriation of religion into political discourse.

Introduction

It has been noted by other scholars that spirits and land are central to the liberation struggle and independence of Zimbabwe. Such previous works include David Lan (1985)³, Terrence Ranger (1967)⁴, Terrence Ranger and Ngwabi Bhebe (eds) (1996),⁵ Martinus Daneel (1995)⁶. Terrence Ranger (1999)⁷, Brian Rutherford (2001)⁸, Marja Spierenburg (2004)⁹ and recent publications Ezra Chitando (2005)¹⁰ and James Cox (2005)¹¹. Almost every author tends to agree that the first and second *Chimurenga* are accreted to two spirit mediums Nehanda and Chaminuka who were charged and executed for insurgency. It is the prophetic voice of Chaminuka, one of the fallen heroes, 'My bones shall arise again' that influenced the revolution and land reform. The prophecy has become the bedrock of all successive revolutions in Zimbabwe. This paper will explore the 'body politic' pertaining reburial activities conducted by war veterans identified from field research in Zimbabwe as aftermath of land reform. My topic resonates James Cox's study in which he examined land reform as 'religious intolerance'¹² but this paper makes a point of departure by testing the anthropologist Katherine Verdery's theory of reburials and 'politics of dead bodies'¹³ on three areas affected by land reform policy. By its emphasis on 'body politic,' the paper will contribute to debates on the land reform. It addresses these questions? To what extent do dead bodies affect political ideology. What is the effect of the body politic on the nation, surviving relatives and leadership? What is the overall effect on land reform?

In order to understand the relationship between traditional religion and politics on the land issue, I will first provide a brief background of the political scenario that has led to the land reform before turning to the reburial activities connected with spirits.

Background

The land question starts when Robert Mugabe assumed power in 1980, promising to give white owned land to the majority black people. But after 20 years into independence, the land had not been adequately redistributed with 4500 white farmers still owning 70% of the prime land. What followed were successive struggles for land by Africans against whites. Disputes surrounding the issue of land has created a serious problem that has plunged the country into economic meltdown.

The land question draws us back to the period before the settlers when Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) was populated by the Shona and Ndebele people, who claim sovereignty. It is believed that the Shona occupied the area 1000 years earlier ahead of the Ndebele arrival in the 1830s. Both displaced the Bushmen who had moved in much earlier in their nomadic movements. In 1890 Cecil John Rhodes's British South Africa Company (BSAC), based in South Africa signed a controversial agreement called the Rudd Concession that conferred exclusive mining rights to the BSAC. After the Great Trek by British settlers from South Africa with a band of wagons called the Pioneer Column they settled at Fort Salisbury in 1890. They named the new colony Rhodesia, after Cecil John Rhodes.¹⁴

In 1965, the then Prime Minister Ian Smith unilaterally declared independence (UDI) after Britain refused Rhodesia decolonise as white state. The colonial government then introduced new administrative law. The Land Apportionment Act 1930 that barred African landownership outside 'reserves' triggered widespread opposition to colonial occupation by both the Shona and Ndebele. Other causes of tension were forced labour supply, hut tax of 10 shillings.¹⁵ Natural disasters such as drought and rinderpest and locusts exacerbated the situation culminating in wars of resistance by the Ndebele and Shona. The first *Chimurenga* war occurred in 1896-97, inspired by spirit mediums of *Mbuya Nehanda*, *Chaminuka* and *Kaguvi* but was put off when leaders were hanged. *Chaminuka's* last prophetic words on the verge of death, 'My Bones shall rise again', greatly influenced the struggle for land by the Shona and Ndebele against white settlers. In Shona culture a person's last words before death are highly valued and have lasting effect in the memory of the living. The second protracted armed struggle took place between 1962-80. It was led by two major liberation movements ZANU under Robert Mugabe and ZAPU under Joshua Nkomo. Most scholars are unanimous that the land issue was the major cause of the guerrilla war in Zimbabwe.¹⁶

In 1976 the Geneva Conference failed to stop the war and Abel Muzorewa's UANC Government of National Unity renewed negotiations that led to the Lancaster House Agreement and paved way for independence. After ascension to power at independence in 1980 by a landslide victory at the polls, the new government promised to resettle blacks on white land.¹⁷

The land question reached its watershed at the Lancaster House agreement. Since the liberation struggle was a fight for land, revolutionary leaders insisted on constitutional

clauses that guaranteed firm commitment to reallocating land on non-racial basis. Under the Lancaster Agreement land would be disposed on a 'willing-buyer' 'willing seller basis'. When this expired after ten years the incumbent government would pass a law to effect compulsory purchases. The bone of contention brewed over compensation. Britain claims to have given the new government GBP44 million which was allegedly misappropriated, a charge government denies. In 1977 the new government set 1 500 farms for compulsory acquisition and expected Britain to compensate for having 'stolen the land from blacks in the first place.'¹⁸ Whilst the government claims to have made great strides to resettle landless people, Britain regards land invasions as chaotic and disrupting the agro-based economy that has catapulted Zimbabwe into economic decline. Herein lay the crunch of the land question that has stirred controversies over the years and placed Zimbabwe on international spotlight.

Land Reform and Aftermath

Since 2000 the political climate of Zimbabwe's situation turned bad due to macro-economic hardships. The West imposed sanctions against Zimbabwe with IMF on 24th September 2001, United States law S494, Zimbabwe Recovery Act of 2001 and the European Union in 2002. The depressed economic climate led to inflation, shortages of basic commodities, fuel, electricity etc. As sign of disgruntlement opposition parties such as Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and pressure groups demanding constitutional change like National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) emerged. After the failure of the referendum on the constitution, the government faced new threat by war veterans demanding gratuity for war compensation. All these factors exerted pressure on the government to address land reform. All this exacerbated by drought greatly contributed to the current economic crisis.¹⁹ Whilst analysts hold that the Zimbabwe's land seizure is the source of the problems, the government attributes them to sanctions imposed by IMF, Britain, USA, EU and its allies. In order to offset the crisis the government has adopted 'Look East Policy'.²⁰

In the same year 2000, groups of war veterans occupied many white owned farms in a move meant to reclaim land. This came to be known as *Jambanja*, third Chimurenga. The revolution was originally started by Chief Svosve of Mashonaland and his people in 70's but subsequently spread rapidly across several places in the country. In mid 2000, the government passed the Land Acquisition Act that made possible compulsory acquisition of land. As a result almost 4 000 white farmers had their farms listed for acquisition. They had to leave their homes and farms before getting compensation. Finally through the Zimbabwe Amendment (no. 17), the government nationalised land, thus declaring all land state property. The government has since embarked on full scale land redistribution alongside continuing invasions.

Resettlement

Soon after independence, the government embarked on a program of resettling people in fulfilment of the war promises. According to Spierenburg, the first post independence resettlement scheme projected resettling 162 000 on white owned land by 1986. The

government accomplished the following; 'By 1991 about 48 000 families had been resettled²¹; by 1998 the number had risen to about 70 000 families'.²²

Between 1980-1990 the government resettled people in Greenspan and Hofmeyer in Mberengwa, DeBeers in Zvishavane in the Midlands Province alone. This province has also seen the construction of new dams such as Mundi and Chingoma irrigation schemes. In fact throughout the country the government implemented the first phase of resettlement along the same model as in the Midlands Province. Alongside the government initiatives, some private companies like Rio Tinto have resettled the Ngowa people to give room to a diamond mine opening in the area.

In August 2006, following the land reform, the chiefs supported by government held celebratory national *biras* (rituals) throughout the country. The traditional religious ceremonies were organised to pay homage to the thousands of Zimbabwean freedom fighters and the nation's spirits for liberating the country from colonial bondage. August is traditional period suitable for holding such ceremonies. The purpose of the *biras* was that Zimbabweans have reclaimed their identity, values, customs and religion in the same way the nation recovered the land.

In the past *biras* brought good fortunes such as rains and good harvests. Recent good rains in Zimbabwe seem to have vindicated the efficacy of rituals. The rains have buoyed hopes of a bumper harvest in the 2006 agricultural season.

Since 2004 the government had instituted commemorative galas to honour the fallen heroes of Zimbabwe of the calibre of former Vice Presidents, such as the Nkomo Gala for Joshua Nkomo, *Bira Mzee* for Simon Muzenda. In the same vein, prominent persons deemed to have participated 'actively' and 'consistently' in the liberation struggle are accorded National Heroes' status and are buried at the Heroes Acre in Harare. Today 91 people lie buried at this acre. Some fallen heroes of lower rank are buried in provincial cemeteries. Then for those who died outside the country, solidarity bashes are held in those countries that hosted them during the war such as Mozambique, Zambia, Tanzania. The rest who died in the country undergo the process of identification, exhumation and reburial in the country.

Zimbabwe has also embarked on a controversial exercise called *Operation Murambatsvina* that saw demolition of shantytowns and informal business kiosks. The government explained the act as a 'clean-up' exercise to curb crime, prostitution and drug trafficking. However the government has been criticised for carrying out illegal evictions that violate human rights and cause homelessness and worsen the condition of the poor.

To date the state is exploring a forest-based land reform programme that aims to cater for indigenous people in forestry business. The Minister of Environment and Tourism, Francis Nhema has announced that the government was considering allocating land for forestry development with a view to promote sustainable development.²³ Following a new discovery recently the government has also set aside land for commercial cultivation of the *jatropha carcus* popularly known as '*jirimono*' a species whose seeds can be

processed into bio-diesel.²⁴ Daneel's project on African earth keeping has already set the pace for indigenous initiatives on land reform in Zimbabwe.

At this point we provide a brief overview of Shona indigenous religion in Zimbabwe that will enable us to understand the religious dimension of the land, especially the potency of spirits in land reform.

Indigenous Religion

Ancestral Spirits

In Zimbabwe the relationship between religion, land and the people has always been close. In the traditional past the land is intimately associated with the history of the chiefdom, with the ruling chief and with ancestral spirits who live in it. Ancestor spirits known as *vadzimu* (pl, *mudzimu*, sl) are spirits of dead relatives considered as the 'king-pin' of the Shona society. They influence the activities and lives of their dependents, the living members of the community. Failure to honour ancestral spirits invokes bad luck for both the individual and community. Misfortunes like droughts, floods, crop failure, sickness and death are blamed on the presence of angered spirits because they have not been accorded honour with proper funeral rites. Moreover they would have been deprived of a very important ritual called *kurova guva* (bringing home ritual). The ritual is supposed to take place a year after the funeral. It inaugurates the ancestral spirits into the family hierarchy.

Rituals are performed for the ancestors by the living descendents. Such rituals include prayers for rain in times of drought wherein spirits of the guardians of the chiefdom, *mhondoro* are believed to control rainfall and fertility.²⁵ Ancestors operate at three levels namely the family, ethnic and national levels.

As 'guardians of the land' ancestors mediate between the Supreme Being *Mwari* and the living descendants. He is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. *Mwari* is his "personal" name derives from either tradition, Christianity or Islam.²⁶ The Shona also call God by other names, referred to as 'praise names' or 'attributes'. The names are used to describe his nature and functions. They include *Musiki* (Creator), *Muvumbi* (Moulder) *Nyadenga* (Owner of Heavens), *Dzivaguru* (Huge Pool).²⁷

Alien and Nature Spirits

The Shona also believe in a host of other spiritual entities that populate their traditional cosmology. One type is *mashavi* (alien spirits). These are spirits of people unknown to the Shona families who die far away from their home without proper burial rites. They include spirits of infants (*chipunha*); white men (*chizungu*), strangers from neighbouring countries such as Mozambique (*chisena*), and animal spirits such as baboon spirit (*shavi regudo*). The general belief is that spirits confer benefits and arts of healing, divination, singing or dance. However some can confer negative qualities like witchcraft, theft and prostitution.

The Shona also believe in other nature spirits. These comprise human spirits raised from the graves such as *tokolotches* and *zvidhoma*. Some spirits like *zvitupwani* and *zvikwambo* (puppies) are associated with witchcraft.

Sacred Practitioners

The chief plays an important role in traditional religious belief. As embodiment of tradition and culture the chief is regarded as sacred. He occupies a central position in the administration of land. Traditionally a chief is not removable from power till death, a situation associated with President Robert Mugabe, hailed by his supporters as 'King', 'Moses' or 'Messiah'. In recognition of the importance of chiefs, the government has introduced a Chief's Council in the House of Assembly. Chiefs get benefits such as lucrative allowances, vehicles loans, medical aid and schemes for school fees.

From this indigenous religious structure, the Shona show a tripartite view of the cosmology. There is belief in a 'world above' inhabited by a Supreme God. Then the 'human world' physically located on earth. Sacred phenomena such as animals, rocks, mountains, hills, trees, rivers and forests also form part of this world. Natural places are believed to be the abode of spirits. Then the other level, the 'underworld' is the 'world below'. On the whole spirits pervade the worlds 'above', 'below' and 'underground'. All worlds are not separate entities but they are interlinked through ritual and conciliation. The Shona also believe in the "anthropocentric" worldview that places the human being in a central position in the cosmology.

In light of this spiritual worldview, what the people expected after the liberation war and land redistribution was descent burial of the victims of war in order to put their souls at rest and make it possible to hold *kurova guva* ritual. In the traditional past man used to be buried next to their cattle and women next to their fields, whilst infants would be buried at the river bed. So this is what the people anticipated of fallen heroes that they would be given proper burial at or close home. In that way the living and dead would be re-united spiritually after long separation during the war. It is upon this cultural and spiritual basis that the government, through the war veterans, instituted exhumation, identification and reburial of the dead.

But prior to the land reform, reburial of former freedom fighters had commenced. Such reburials testify the potency of spirits in Zimbabwe's revolutionary history. The Gutu reburial ceremony of fallen heroes illustrates the point.

Gutu Ceremony

On 19th August 1989, Mafuranhunzi Gumbo (Martinus Daneel)'s field work reports on reburial activities of fallen ZANLA fighters at Gutu Mission in the Masvingo Province in Zimbabwe moved by traditional artefacts of 'guerrilla snuff'.²⁸ Daneel attended reburials of war victims, "More than half of them had died in battle: eight in raids, seven in direct skirmishes with Rhodesian soldiers. At least a third - eleven- died of food poisoning."²⁹

Mafuranhunzi also notes that alongside traditional religion, Christianity which played a significant role during Chimurenga by attending *pungwe* (night vigils) and providing logistical support in form of medicines, clothes, money, and food supplies to freedom fighters, actively participated at the reburial ceremony. Both the Roman Catholic and independent church leaders said prayers for intercession for the dead fallen heroes.³⁰ Since the liberation war had nurtured 'heroes within the church', their presence at Gutu ceremony was significant. After all the reburials were not exclusively for war heroes but meant to serve all civil dead, alongside the fighters. However it is outside the purview of this paper to treat in depth the Christian religion and land. This is treated extensively in a separate project.

Daneel succinctly captures the significance of the Gutu reburial ceremony, 'By identification of the living with the living dead, Gutu recaptures the living religion of Chimurenga, the spirit of Africa'.³¹ Quite striking is that participants confessed their dependence upon *Mwari*, the supreme "guardian of the land."³² Once the reburial was done, the dead would have *kurova guva* held for them. The ritual is important for the living cannot perform any functions prior to the event. The ritual liberates the souls of the dead and the living. Through the Gutu incident Mafuranhunzi relates his theme of liberation of the ecology through tree planting and game conservation to the struggle for Zimbabwe.³³

Mt Darwin Case

In a field research conducted in Mt Darwin,³⁴ Northern District town of Zimbabwe in Mashonaland Central Province, it emerged there are certain religious activities surrounding reburial of the dead bodies of people who died in mass atrocities conducted by the white regime during the war of liberation. The exercise is spearheaded by War Veterans who form an Association. They have established Administrative Offices at the Headquarters at Mt Darwin. An executive body comprises the Reburial Committee Chaired by Comrade (Cde) D.A. Chihobo, Historic and Monuments Department by Cde Gumbeze and Education Department by Cde Goto Mukanya. The reburial committee operates under the guidance of a spirit medium. Identifying the graves is extremely complex given very few people witnessed the incidents of massacre in a war situation. The exhumation and identification of the fighters is made possible through the cooperation of the burial committee, spirit mediums, prophets, and local people who witnessed the massacres during the liberation war. The spirit medium acts as host of a national spirit. He leads a group of young male mediums who call themselves 'comrades'.³⁵ They sniff out the graves and imitate guerrilla fighters during the war. They declare that war is still on until land is redistributed to the landless blacks.

The activities in Mt Darwin commenced in June 2004 with the discovery of graves containing human remains of freedom fighters. Specifically 19 mass graves containing 5 000 bodies, arguably the largest number in the country were discovered, prompting the efforts to search for more.³⁶ According to an interviewee, Mt Darwin experienced intensive fighting during the liberation war due to its proximity with Mozambique, a

country that played host to ZANLA forces fighting the white regime in Rhodesia.³⁷

Mt Darwin lies in the border with Mozambique which used by guerrilla fighters as entry point by during the war. The area experienced fierce battles and is laced with landmines that claim beasts and humans.³⁸ The aerodrome was the scene of all the horrors during the war of liberation. The Rhodesian soldiers with helicopters tied 'terrorists' they captured with ropes and dangled them in the air for public viewing. Then they either dumped them on the ground for display or burnt them in shallow graves.³⁹ In one incident a deceased's medium got possessed and identified himself to reburial committee, by voice and attire as host of a fallen hero. The medium described his attire at time of death, 'a khaki trousers dumped in a piles of three in a mass grave'.⁴⁰ The medium then directed the party to the burial spot. The war veterans dug and exhumed the body for reburial at his home and the family ritual of *kurova guva* was held.⁴¹ As the interviewee stressed the ritual is important. The deceased must be attached to his home, to his ancestors where the umbilical cord lies buried.⁴² A connection is thus established between the living and dead.

People in Mt Darwin strongly believe that the happenings in the area are not only confined to their locality but are national matters. Spirits are alleged to be calling upon all Zimbabweans to urgently assist them by provision of decent burial. The Herald reports the story about the spirit of one of the fighters, who possessed his younger brother known by his Chimurenga name, Comrade Hama Yesango from Zimunya in Manicaland province, who said, 'All Zimbabweans must help in according us descent burials. I want to be buried where my ancestors are. We died trying to free this country from colonial rule and all patriotic Zimbabweans owe us descent burial'.⁴³ Another freedom fighter pleads, 'I want to be buried in my home area here in Mt Darwin so that my soul will find peace and rest at last. My remains are in Buhera where I was killed by Smith's soldiers in 1978'.⁴⁴ It is estimated that over 5 000 people including villagers and war collaborators were massacred by Rhodesian forces in Mashonaland Central. Their bodies were left lying in the bush, buried in shallow graves or dumped in disused mines and pits. Some were devoured by wild animals when relatives were barred from burying them. By 2004 a total 19 graves had been identified in Mashonaland Central Province.⁴⁵

When bones were discovered in Mt Darwin, they had to be taken by policemen to a pathologist for forensic test. The forensic scientist, specialist in the area of the bones would examine the bones to possibly deduce the gender, age, height, race as well as medical history and manner of death.⁴⁶ The Mt Darwin reburial program set precedent for similar efforts to give descent burial to fallen heroes of Zimbabwe who died during the war in neighbouring countries such as Zambia, Mozambique, Botswana, Angola, Tanzania.

Rehabilitating Graves

The government of Zimbabwe through the National Museum and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ) has embarked on a project of rehabilitating the graves of fallen heroes both in and outside the country. According to NNMZ's curator of militaria, Retired Lieutenant-Colonel Edgar Nkiwane, the project comprises four phases that include

identification of the liberation war sites, traditional acknowledgement of the souls of fallen freedom fighters, physical rehabilitation of the burials, erecting memorial shrines and site museums or interpreting centres as well as conservation and promotion of Zimbabwe's liberation heritage.⁴⁷ The significance of the shrine is that it honours the heroes who sacrificed their lives for the liberation of the country.

The project has identified liberation war camps and battle sites in several places. In Mozambique, the sites are Chimoio, Nyadzonya, Doroie, Chibawawa, Nyangawo, Tembwe, Maroro, Mavonde, Mapai, Madulu etc. In Zambia there are at Freedom Camp, Nampundwe, Mkushi, Mulungushi, Kabanga, Kavalamanja, Sinde, Solwezi etc, In Botswana there is Selebi-Phikwe, Dukwe and Francistown. In Angola there is Luso and Boma and Tanzania there is Nachingwea, Morogoro, Mgagao, Iringa etc.⁴⁸

From mass graves identified thus far, Mukushi camp scored the highest number of the unburied human remains throughout the entire liberation war. According to statistics a total 1 500 girls might have been killed at Mukushi. At Nyadzonya statistics on metal tags show 732, and Chimoio casualties are estimated to be 700 trained male adults, 1000 untrained male adults, 300 trained female adults, 1500 untrained female adults, 2000 juvenile males and females, 200 guerrillas wounded from the front and 300 refugees.⁴⁹ At Freedom camp 367 freedom fighters were killed by Rhodesian forces.⁵⁰

According to the curator of museums, the remains in most of the graves showed various ages. Bones displayed injuries caused by arms, machine gun, mortar fire, burns by incendiary weapons such as napalm, or grenades. Some parts of human remains showed bullet riddles. At Mulungushi camp, some paraphernalia associated with ZIPRA forces were identified; 'Green denim trousers, Russian F1 fragmentation and blast hand grenades, AK-47 magazine clips, Russian V-shape military boots, East German type combat uniform, green nylon wet proofs...individual utensils such as knives, toothbrushes, spoons and a few Zambian coins'.⁵¹ At Nyadzonya refugee camp, artefacts associated with remains were found and these include, carvings, personal utensils like spoons, cups, plates, toothbrushes, etc. The clothing recovered was civilian and no military uniforms.⁵²

Reburial projects are linked with traditional leaders, continuing the trend by guerrillas during the liberation war. Traditional leaders still enjoy considerable respect in Zambia and Mozambique. As 'owners of the land', the reburial team need their advice and guidance to conduct traditional rites in their areas.

Our field research also established that reburial activities in Zimbabwe are not only a government driven project, some private companies have also been involved in resettling people as part of land redistribution with government approval. The Murowa incident is a case in point.

Murowa Episode

Rio- Tinto opened a commercial diamond mining company in 2004 at Murowa, some 40km away from Zvishavane in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. Operations at Murowa mine only started when 142 families were moved from their original homes to Shashe farms north of Gaths Mine, Mashava in order to make way for the diamond mining project. Their homesteads were removed and new ones built for them. Those affected moved and occupied new plots.⁵³ Today the community enjoys the comfort of modern homes constructed by the mine with fenced yards, cattle pens, fowl runs, etc. New facilities such as school, clinic and church have been built at the new settlement. However some residents complain about what they perceive as inadequate compensation relative to the wealth procured by the diamond mine.

In its planning stage, the mine faced serious cultural resilience by resettle people due to traditional beliefs. The Shona have profound concerns about the treatment of the dead. When resettlement started the local community raised fears of separating with their dead ones buried in their homesteads. So the mine undertook to exhume the bodies and relocate the graves for reburial at a new site just outside the mining zone.⁵⁴ By so doing the mine acted in accordance with traditional belief that consider the dead as not having been abandoned. The exhumation and reburial was conducted by prominent undertakers Doves Morgan. During exhumation the most spectacular aspect was the discovery of bodies 'intact'⁵⁵ but with some crinkles. Some people identified their deceased by clothes, blankets and special possessions like mats, pots, cups, buried alongside the dead. After identification by their families, the remains were marked by tags and carried in coffins. At the gravesite, traditional rites were performed by the elders. However 3 bodies were found missing.⁵⁶ In traditional belief the witches had taken their bodies but undertakers suspected false identification and would return to do the exercise again. Such continued attachment of the living and dead has sustained through rituals of commemoration of the dead conducted by resettled people from time to time at the cemetery.

The above exposition shows that the Shona people have profound concerns about the treatment of the dead. Through activities of war veterans, spirits and the mine in the reburial exercise approved by government, religion and politics become closely tied together. The Shona people understand this link in terms of their traditional cosmology.

Analysis

In its approach to land reform, the government of Zimbabwe treats the land issue and reburials, spearheaded by War Veterans within the traditional religious framework. But the political issue of the land remains the key one. It has been the sole reason for fighting the war. So all matters pertaining to the land especially reburials are interpreted from that perspective. By so doing the government manipulates the traditional beliefs to advance a political project .

Land reform adopts the traditional format of land acquisition-cleansing-appeasement. In the past when elders acquire new land for settlement, the new space was marked by ritual cleansing. Then ritual appeasement of departed souls would follow. The purpose of the traditional rites is to appease the dead and exorcise evil spirits. So by embarking on land invasion, resettlement and 'clean up', ending up with activities of exhumation and reburial such as in Gutu and Mt Darwin, the government assimilated traditional cultural practices. It acted in line with traditional spirit world but also aroused political sentiments of national unity against a common enemy, the white regime. It adopts a political rhetoric that Zimbabwe was a victim of British and US led conspiracy against Zimbabwe's land reforms and had profound interest to re-colonise Zimbabwe and that the West was undermining the economy through sanctions. So for the government reburial project is imperative and justified component of land reform. What establishes in the traditional mindset is government's overt intention to help families reconcile with dead relatives. In the whole process, the spirits and chiefs play a central role. Traditional religion and politics become intricately connected. But one may argue that Zimbabwe government has assimilated traditional religious worldviews in political context.

The most puzzling question is how did the government influence the people to make political interpretation of a religious discourse. In other words what is the effect of religious and political factors on land reform? A convincing explanation stems from the value accorded the dead bodies in Shona culture. According to Verdery, dead bodies have certain properties that make them symbols. Dead bodies don't speak but words can be put into mouths or their words can be interpreted out of context. Dead bodies provide a 'Curriculum Vitae' or 'resume'⁵⁷ upon which people can rewrite history. So what gives a dead body its effectiveness in politics is precisely its ambiguity. Also dead bodies are associated with awe, fear and sacrality as people grapple with questions of ultimate reality. According to Verdery, politics benefits from the aura of sanctity presented by the corpse and reburials (re) sacralise the political order.⁵⁸

Politics of Dead Bodies

With the reburial process, the theory of the dead 'body politics' plays a part. Anthropology holds that a remembered dead body is much more than a dead corpse. It is a material symbol of history. A dead body reorders the world of meaning and establishes cosmic order.⁵⁹ In Shona tradition a dead person's body is sacred. The dead become more powerful after death. In our case studies above, the significance of dead bodies personified as humans, derive from their 'biographies'. As part of the human system bones contain a sacral element and thus become effective political symbols.

By selling the verdict and power of the fallen heroes, the government plays or manoeuvres the body politic. When the dead bodies are exhumed, paraded and reburied they become 'magic' and can influence perceptions. Reburials reorganise world of meaning centred on issues of justice, suffering, blame, and compensation. These issues characterise the land question. As ritual practice, reburials are effective tools for shaping the politics of restitution, nation building and moral accountability. On a broader perspective manoeuvring of dead bodies in both the physical and symbolic senses help re-

write national history. According to Molchanov, deep social change inevitably raptures time and space continuities. Reburials help to restore them.⁶⁰

Healing

In post war trauma such as Zimbabwe experiences, reburial rituals are meant to effect healing. The whole exercise of reburial is to help the nation recover from the devastation of several years of violent conflict and war. In the case of human remains identified in and outside the country, thousands of unmarked graves were not accorded proper burial rites. The bodies of war victims lay in a disrespectful state, just as their murderers dumped them. They lay in unmarked graves, without coffins, 'facedown' but reburials ensure they are buried 'face up' in coffins.⁶¹ So reburials restore human hood and dignity to its original state as in life. As such reburials, as cosmogonic experience, recreate and reorder community.

In the Shona culture when the dead bodies are given descent burial, rites of *kurova* can take place. By this the soul of the deceased is put to 'rest' and is 'at peace'. So surviving relatives are 'liberated' and can perform their normal duties. Once this is accomplished, a state of 'normalcy' is attained. The rites play an important role in the grieving process. It is on this basis that the government embarked on the exhumation, documentation and reburial of Zimbabwe's dead.

During the reburial exercise, relatives were able to identify the bodies of their own deceased relatives, owing to their intact state of clothing, which would retain its normal colour and shape. It is this process of verifying long standing eye witness accounts, and giving the families a clear vision of their family history in all its details that matters. The process is 'edifying'. It amounts to returning 'more' than the bones.⁶² According to a psychologist, the exhumation process is 'intense and devastating' but 'ultimately worthy the effort'⁶³ because surviving families can then begin the process of healing.

Exhumations, spearheaded by war veterans and backed by government turned to be community-driven healing process. The primary aim was to 'heal the dead'. In Shona belief such a process effects 'drying the tears of the dead'. In Gutu and Mt Darwin the rituals brought about the desired effect, to console war victims. The massacres committed by Smith's regime during the war of liberation is perceived as violation of the burial rituals and desecration of the burial sites. For the traditional Shona people such acts are a 'denial' of the dead. Depriving them of descent burial is to deny they ever lived and are thus erased from history. Such attitude is abominable and demeaning. So as 'healing', reburial reasserts their position. It acknowledges their identities and attaches them with their families. The white regime had 'dehumanised them through false claims, labelling them *magandanga* (terrorists). By this they deprived them their humanity. But through reburial, 'the bones restore the truth, the bones tell the truth back, and this restores self esteem and dignity to the dead'.⁶⁴ Reburials open avenues for reinterpretation of the past. Forensic Anthropology of the Bones believes, 'The Stories Bones Tell'.⁶⁵ From the reburial experiences, the message that bones tell is 'healing' and 'truth. As such, 'Bones don't lie'. So by conducting reburial activities, it seems the government capitalised upon

this belief.

Monuments

Monuments also play an important role that shows the indebtedness of the people to the spirits. In the traditional cultural belief, monuments erected to commemorate the dead freedom fighters are significant. They serve as a spiritual link with the fallen heroes. The shrines help preserve permanent natural values upheld by the people. They arouse regional and national unity and identity as a distinguished heritage in Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Southern Africa where shrines have been built. It is an expression as well as symbol of collective will of Africans to be makers of their own history. From the point of view of party leadership in Zimbabwe, the sites inspire all people, especially the youth to follow in the footsteps of the heroes.⁶⁶ So monuments play an important role to confirm the potency of spirits. As Gough observes, public space surrounding war memorials and military monuments has always been important in the iconography of remembrance. In the 19th centuries these spaces took the form of garden cemeteries and memorial plantations.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Debates on land reform amount to the fact that it is a noble cause but the method applied for acquisition has created serious problems and is blamed for plunging the Southern African nation into severe shortages of basic commodities; food, fuel, electricity etc. Land reform has been riddled with problems such as lack of collateral, inadequate agricultural training and planning for new farmers, insufficient inputs, no irrigation, infrastructure of roads, electricity, schools, hospitals. But Mugabe says the economic and political troubles are the result of sabotage by domestic and Western opponents of his policy of seizing white owned farms to give to landless blacks.⁶⁸ The land debates create a vicious cycle of accusation and counter accusations turning the land issue into a 'crisis'.

From this perspective, land reform is seen as renegeing by Robert Mugabe of his promise of reconciliation over the land, 'We will not seize land from anyone who has a use for it. Farmers who are able to produce and prove useful to society will find us co-operative'.⁶⁹ Recent government efforts to offer white farmers moratorium to return to farms has made farmers sceptical about land grab reversal. As for manipulation of chiefs into political game, critics accuse Mugabe of receding into style of idolism, cult status typical of African politics.⁷⁰

For Mugabe invocation of ancestors and bones of dead bodies manifest in rituals testify to its spiritual basis. The rationale is, since spirits have been involved in the liberation war their goals had not been met at Lancaster since economic power remained as white monopoly. So land reform, epitomised through nationalisation is meant to seal land redistribution and solve the problem but albeit sparking new one.

The selective criteria used for reburials of fallen heroes has received sharp criticism. The critical question is what happens to spirits of other war victims such as ex -Rhodesian soldiers and people in Matabeleland who died during the war but were not accorded proper burial in a war situation. This issue of forgotten bodies has remained politically and culturally sensitive. In a parliamentary motion raised by Ms Misihairambwi-Mushonga, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) Member of Parliament and applauded by the house, there is a call to honour the widows of fallen heroes. The idea is to document contributions made by widows of fallen heroes to the liberation struggle.

In light of macro-economic problems inflicting the people of Zimbabwe, many feel the incumbent regime is spent force. They should discontinue and give way to younger generation since the land has been re-distributed. However others see the President as charismatic leader, bold and unflinching, possessing virtues, 'lucid intellect, command of language and unwavering commitment to a united Zimbabwe make him stand as a leader.'⁷¹ Someone observed, 'Like him or not the man has left an indelible mark in the annals of history'. As a result some of his speeches have been recorded on CD and will soon appear on market.

War Veterans, through reburial exercise re-interpret and reconstruct the Shona cosmology in religious terms. They create new worlds of meaning for the people. The use of war rhetoric and appeal to ancestry are ironically instruments to entrench power. Dead bodies have been manipulated for 'political profit' to attain political legitimacy. Invocation of the spirits or dead bodies, a technique designed to recycle history is meant to recreate the world that has been vandalised by enemies, the colonizers. The reburials, national rituals and gala meant to heal the wounds or post war trauma tend to manipulate traditional psyche. The land reform appears to have appropriated religious themes into political discourse.

Internal perspectives on land reform reflect that despite its multifaceted picture for and against it, the program is a political and spiritual matter. Its religiosity can be verified but also politicised. Reburials convert sacred values into political discourse. But by and large the land issue remains one of the most vexing problems Zimbabwe ever had pitting Zimbabwe government and Britain. But a popular belief says, 'Whenever two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers'. Perhaps as way forward, the West should understand the African mindset, devise new diplomatic strategies to solve the problem and lift economic 'sanctions' at least for the sake of the people. Conversely Mugabe should desist from the 'revenge motif' of 'stolen land', allow real political and economic reform. Lately, Sweden has urged Zimbabwe to mend relations with the West, to start 'building bridges' and regain confidence and trust with the international world.

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NOTES

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² Former ZANLA and ZIPRA freedom fighters during the liberation war against the Rhodesian army. They are also called 'ex-combatants', 'guerrillas'.

³ David Lan, *Guns and Rain: Spirit Mediums and Guerrilla War in Zimbabwe*, Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985.

⁴ Terence Ranger, *1896-7 Rebellion*, London: Heinemann, 1967.

⁵ Terrence Ranger and Ngwabi Bhebe, *Society in Zimbabwe's Liberation War*, Oxford: Currey, 1996.

⁶ Martinus Daneel, *Guerrilla Snuff*, Baobab Books, Harare: Zimbabwe, 1995.

⁷ Terence Ranger, *Voices from the Rock, Nature, Culture and History in the Matopo Hills in Zimbabwe*, Oxford: James Currey, 1999.

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⁹ Marja Spierenburg, *Strangers, Spirits, and Land Reform: Conflicts about Land in Dande, Northern Zimbabwe*, Leiden: Brill, 2004.

¹⁰ Ezra Chitando, 'In the Beginning was the Land': the Appropriation of Religious Themes in Political Discourse in Zimbabwe', *Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol 75, 2, July 2005, p.220-239 (20)

¹¹ James Cox, 'The Land Crisis in Zimbabwe: A Case of Religious Intolerance?', *Fieldwork In Religion*, 1.1. 2005, p. 35-48.

¹² Ibid. p.35.

¹³ Katherine Verdery, 'The Political lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Post socialist Change', Columbia University Press, 1999. Online <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/v/verdery-bodies.html>, 2/2/2006.

¹⁴ 'Zimbabwe Crisis: The Battle for Land'. BBC News Online:<http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 04/04/2004.

¹⁵ H.Moyana and M.Sibanda, *The African Heritage*, Harare: Zimbabwe Educational Books, 1984, p. 29.

¹⁶ See Ranger 1967, Lan 1985.

¹⁷ Moyana, Sibanda, 1984, p. 46

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *The Sunday Mail* 20-26 November, 2005.

²⁰ Economic partnerships with Eastern countries like China, Malaysia etc.

²¹ Palmer 1990 and Blackenburg 1994:30 Quoted in Spierenburg, 2004, p.2.

²² Moyo 2000: 5. 'The Political Economy of Land Aquisition and Redistribution in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26 (10): 5-28. Quoted in Spierenburg, 2004, p.2.

²³ *The Herald* 3/01/06.

²⁴ *The Herald* 29/12/05.

²⁵ M.F.C.Bourdillon, *The Shona People*, Gweru, Mambo Press, 1982.

²⁶ Ambrose Moyo, 'Religion and Politics in Zimbabwe', in Petersen, K.H., *Religion, Development and African Identity*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1987, pp59-72. See also Marthinus Daneel, *Mwari God of the Matopo Hills*, 1970.

²⁷ Ibid pp59-72

²⁸ Daneel, 1995.

²⁹ Ibid p.9

³⁰ Ibid p.38.

³¹ Ibid p. 36.

³² Daneel, op.cit., 1995, p. 10.

³³ Martinus Daneel, 'Environmental Reform: A new Venture for Traditional Custodians of the Land',

Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law, Vol 19, 1981. See also *Earth Keeping in Missiological Perspective: an African Challenge*, Boston: African Studies Centre, 2000.

³⁴ Mt Darwin was named by Selous after Charles Darwin. The original name used by indigenous inhabitants, the Korekore is Pfura, which means Rhinoceros. See 'Rhodesian Place Names: Mt Darwin'. Online <http://www.rhodesian.com/rsr/rsr2-002.html>.

³⁵ Title used for solidarity during the liberation war.

³⁶ *The Herald Online*, 5/10/04. See also *People's Daily Online* <http://www.english.people.com.cn>, 8/7/04.

³⁷ Private interview Mt Darwin, 13/08/04.

³⁸ 'Hunger Stalks Drought Stricken Mt Darwin', *Financial Gazette Online* <http://fingaz.co.zw/fingaz/2003/December/December19/4427.shtml>, 2/3/06

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Private interview, 13/08/04.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Private interview, see note 37.

⁴³ *The Herald Online*, 5/10/04

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ 'Forensic Anthropology', Online [http://library.thinkquest.org/04oct/00206/text-pti-forensic-anthropology](http://library.thinkquest.org/04oct/00206/text-pti-forensic-anthropology.htm), htm, 1/23/2006

⁴⁷ *The Herald* 18/08/04.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *The Herald* 24/08/04.

⁵⁰ *The Herald* 01/11/05.

⁵¹ *The Herald* 23/08/04.

⁵² *The Herald* 24/08/04.

⁵³ 'The Zimbabwe Situation', Online <http://ZimbabweSituation.com>.

⁵⁴ The researchers visited a graveyard with close to 12 deceased buried at the site, 6/08/04.

⁵⁵ Private interview, 6/08/04.

⁵⁶ Private interview, see note 55.

⁵⁷ Verdery, op.cit. p.5.

⁵⁸ Ibid p.11.

⁵⁹ Ibid p.8.

⁶⁰ Mikhail Molchanov, 'Canadian Slavonic Papers: Political Lives of Dead Bodies. Reburial and Post socialist Change', Online http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi/_qa3763/is_200003/ai_n8890692, 17/3/2006.

⁶¹ See Verdery, op.cit. p.6.

⁶² Shari Eppel, 'Barbara Chester Award: For Clinicians and Healing Practitioners for their Work with Survivors of Torture', Online <http://www.barbarachesteraward.org/SharifEppel.html>, 1/16/2006, p.2.

⁶³ Ibid p.1ff.

⁶⁴ (...)

⁶⁵ Forensic Anthropology, 'The Stories Bones Tell-Public Access of Indianapolis', Online <http://www.indiyaccess.org/video-library/science-and-technology/stories-bones-tell/>, 20/3/2006.

⁶⁶ *The Herald* 23/08/04.

⁶⁷ Paul Gough, 'From Heroes Graves to Parks of Peace: Landscape of Remembrance, Protest and Peace', *Landscape Research*, Rout ledge: Part of the Taylor and Francis Group, Vol 25, 2, July 1, 2000.

⁶⁸ 'Zanu-PF, MDC drew secret constitution,' *New Zimbabwe.com*, Online <http://www.newzimbabwe/pages/mbeki/29.13718.html>, 6/02/2006.

⁶⁹ 'Stay with us...and constitute a nation based on national Unity', Online <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/pages/farm38.13691.html>, 30/1/2006.

⁷⁰ Ibid p. 2.

⁷¹ Daneel op.cit., 1995, p.40.