

The Politics and Symbolism of the #ThisFlag in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

In the context of the hashtag movement #ThisFlag, this paper examines the sensual affects drawn from flag symbolism and why the Zimbabwean flag is policed by the state. It uses the symbolism and politics of the hashtag movements by focusing on Evan Mawarire's national lament and the Zimbabwean flag. It employs a literary and discursive analysis of Mawarire's lament using desktop research on the contestations surrounding the flag. It shows that in dominant nationalist discourses, the flag is imaged as the land/nation and feminised to warrant it utmost respect, protection, sanctity and re/productive capacity. On the other hand, the #ThisFlag has made use of the flag to resist and subvert grand and naturalised dominant discourses of nationalism and citizenship to foster new imagi/nations of the nation. The use of the flag by the movement provoked ZANU-PF's ownership of the national flag, which is quite similar to and has been drawn from the flag of the party, hence the movement was challenging the identity of the party, its ownership and its relevance. The paper shows the fluidity of symbols and symbolic meanings and why #ThisFlag had symbolic radical power and the possibilities of using the state's and ZANU-PF's cultural tools to challenge ZANU-PF's hold on national knowledge and power. It contributes to our understanding of both state-power retention and how subaltern voices can uncover the agency of subjects within the very instruments of control incessantly used by dominant regimes.

Keywords: flag symbolism; hashtag movements; gendered imaginations; per-forming nation; subject surveillance; social media

1. In Memory of the School Head Boy

Mondays were the most fascinating at Mavedzenge Primary, a rural school in Shurugwi, Zimbabwe where I partly did primary education in the late 1980s. We assembled to mark the week's beginning and we all partook in the expected school rituals. Edmore was the tallest, strongest and eldest pupil, and was also an example of discipline. As head boy, he had the responsibility of hoisting and lowering the national flag. Considering the colossal importance attached to it, some of us wished to feel it, but we were too defiled to touch the sacred cloth and were left only to watch it from a distance and sensualise its feel.

The head boy's uprightness, seriousness and attentiveness during the flying and lowering of the flag was astonishing and novel but also exemplary and instructive. The whole act transformed into a cult, with the rest of us standing astute in respect of the shrine and the progressing ritual. At that time, I do not remember holding any sense of all this drama and spectacle of flag supremacy. Later on, I realised that this was not unique to my school. Almost all Zimbabwe's schools have experienced more or less the same performance. Shanafelt (2009:13) says "flags are explained as symbols of group solidarity that achieve force through ritual processes [and] our evolved social intelligence makes us sensitive to the topographic features of flag displays that signal relationships of dominance and subordination." Carrion (2006) posits that rituals dealing with flags constitute rituals of power. This relates to Durkheim's (1995) sentiments that flags take a totemic character which makes them living objects, sacred and powerful.

In the above sense, the elaborate school ritual translates to a miniature performance of the nation. In a very religious and spiritual way, the national anthem, 'Simudzai Mureza/Phakamisani iFlag' (Blessed be the land of Zimbabwe) is sung and the flag is hoisted. The national anthem focuses on land and its beauty, the liberation struggle and patriotic history and heroism and continuity. However, the flag rituals that we witness in Zimbabwe are part of the invented tradition transported to Zimbabwe and other parts of the world through colonialism. Invented tradition involves "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms [and] normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past" (Hobsbawm 1983:1). In his work on the invention of tradition in colonial Africa, Ranger (1983) shows the African manipulation of

the invented tradition by elders against youth, men against women, and natives against immigrants. In Zimbabwe, the suitable historic past used to coin the national tradition is what Ranger (2004) calls patriotic history and is narrated both in the national anthem and on flag features.

There is significant literature around nation as an invented tradition that makes use of symbols like flags and monuments (Carrion 2006; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Among others, Kriger (2003) and McClintock (1993) view slogans, symbols, particular dressing and political campaign material as very crucial in imagi/nation. The state and the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) have been using these with a heightened sense of monopoly and impunity to legitimate hegemony and vanquish political competition. To date, the Western invented tradition of, among others, the national flag, has remained with a commandist, sexualised and gendered culture that seeks domination.

Looking at how the flag has been ritualised and nationalised, the paper takes a narrative of Zimbabwean nationalism through the flag. Although the deployment of symbols and cultural tools to negotiate nationhood and citizenship has a long history, their meanings are always shifting. Also, the power to instrumentalise and give meanings to symbols and cultural tools often undergoes some displacement. This work explores the power and insurgency of the #ThisFlag movement, initiated in a social media post on 20 April 2016 by Evan Mawarire, a Pastor of the His Generation Baptist church. Examining its politics and symbolism, the paper argues that the movement successfully purchased on one of the state's and ZANU-PF's useful symbolic instruments of loyalty to challenge dominant nationalist narratives and the naturalised patriotic history. This analysis contributes to our understanding of diverging narratives of nationalism, the complex workings of power and resistances as well as the fluidity of texts and textual meanings.

2. Conceptualising Zimbabwean Nationhood and Citizenship

Generally, African nationalism and Zimbabwean nationalism in particular, is an imagined response to distinct political and historical colonial memories and anti-colonial struggles (Mawere 2016). Zimbabwean nationalism and citizenship are also constructed in line with ZANU-PF's moment and nature of crisis.

Kruger (2003) argues that ZANU-PF's nation building projects are founded on 'a party-nation and a party-state' as a means to establish itself as the legitimate and permanent foundation of the nation and the state. In support, Ranger (2004) argues that Zimbabwean nationalism and citizenship are mediated along patriotic history favouring the dominant ZANU-PF narrative of becoming nation. One of the instruments used to foster this is the national flag and its inherent dominant messaging. The national flag is quite similar to the flag of the ZANU-PF party as it was drawn from the party flag. Its colours and features represent the struggle on which ZANU-PF popularise patriotic history from which the party draws its identity, legitimacy and authority to govern.

Under the patriotic historical narrative, there are attempts to corrupt the affective senses of Zimbabweans to accept the idea of nation even in the absence of a practical feel of nationhood. The discourses of suffering and sacrifices are matched with the flag and linked to nationalism and citizenship in an emotive way that, in a sense of belonging, aims to bring diverse people together for ZANU-PF's interests. However, the national flag, the very text that has been used to plant Zimbabwe's national ethos and legitimise ZANU-PF's dominance has been used to unsettle or create alternative or subversive versions and re/visions of nationalism and citizenship. This alludes to various cultural studies scholars like Fiske (1987) and Hall (1980) who dismiss the stability and smoothness of hegemony and state ideology. This destabilisation is evident in the Zimbabwean post-2013 elections period when the national flag, the state's and ZANU-PF's symbol of nationalism, citizenship and loyalty is re/imagined following the country's socio-economic and political decay. The period following the 2013 elections challenged the state's and ZANU-PF's monopoly on the flag. Mawarire and the #ThisFlag movement provoked ZANU-PF's ownership of the flag by creating a new struggle and warriors of the current times. The state and ZANU-PF saw this as an attempt to annihilate patriotic history since the movement was sort of stealing the patriotic history, the identity of the party and its ownership.

During the campaigns towards the 2013 elections, which were won by ZANU-PF, a promise of 2, 2 Million jobs was part of ZANU-PF's election package as it sought to win the electorate after the embarrassing loss in the 2008 plebiscite. Added to this was the 2013 ZANU-PF election manifesto, 'Taking back the economy, Indigenise, empower, develop and create employment' (Southall 2013). ZANU-PF's economic blueprint, 'Zimbabwe agenda for sustainable socio-

economic transformation (Zim Asset)' was part and parcel of the manifesto. Many other strategic strides were made after the elections to ensure ZANU-PF's hold on both the political and economic landscape. These include the continual demonisation of dissenting voices as anti-Zimbabwean and Western puppets, and the heavy-handedness of security forces during protests.

However, the post-2013 period witnessed massive industrial incapacitation and closures in both the public and private sectors, resulting in both remuneration backlogs and gross job layoffs. The economy took a downturn, fast approaching that of the pre- and post-2008 elections. The multi-currency system and general stability, which had prevailed during inclusive government between 2009 and 2013 known as the Government of National Unity (GNU) increasingly deteriorated, rendering ordinary people vulnerable. Faced with such a challenging situation, the government failed to bring the much-needed pragmatic sanity, much to the anger of the suffering citizens. This anger coincided that with information showing that more than a third of the Zimbabwean population needed food aid (Aucoin 2016), the ignorance of the country's leadership and the prevailing high corruption levels such as the disappearance of US\$15 billion worth of diamond revenue (Ngangani 2016). The electorate had been sold a dummy for politicians' bellies. It is in this context of betrayed aspirations and loss of hope in the official governance system that the hashtag movements emerged as attempts to institute some form of citizen governance using social media as alternative governance platforms and reliable and open communication channels. The #ThisFlag is one such movement which ended up exploding and sprouting into others such as #MyZimbabwe by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)'s Youth Assembly, #ThisBhachi by some MDC parliamentarians and #ThisGown by unemployed graduates. The #ThisFlag also intersected with some anti-government movements like #Tajamuka, led by Promise Mkwanzani and Occupy Africa Unity Square, led by Patson Dzamara whose brother disappeared under suspected security forces machinations. To this extent, 2016 has been recorded as one of Zimbabwe's most active years of protest (Aucoin 2016).

Opposition parties specifically the MDC and civic society formations have been tapping only from their usual pool of supporters for protests. After the high labour turn-over, the collapse of trade unionism and the neutralisation of oppositional politics on student campuses, opposition parties like the MDC did

not make follow-up strategies to re-group allies on alternative platforms or bridge generational gaps. Internationally, research has shown increased political apathy especially among the youth (Bosch 2013; Harris et al. 2010). In Zimbabwe, the many years of Mugabe's rule and opposition political parties' failure to take power from ZANU-PF might have created negative perceptions and withdrawal from political participation. However, there are arguments that youths are not active in conventional forms of politics but have started showing political expressions and actions elsewhere. Social media is one of the crucial platforms where youths uniquely re-engage in politics (Bosch 2016, 2013; Fenton 2012). In Zimbabwe, it is Evan Mawarire's social media protest which is deeply rooted in one of Zimbabwe's most affective national symbols and a potent ZANU-PF weapon, and tapping into the ordinary people as well as divorcing itself from categories of politics and activism that has breathed some more life into Zimbabwe's protest spirit. Mawarire was conscious of people's feelings for the flag since it is a tangible object of their collectiveness. A collective feeling is only possible upon attachment to a tangible and common object (Shanafelt 2009; Eriksen 2007; Carrion 2006). Thus, #ThisFlag movement emerged within dominant discourses of nationalism and citizenship and draws from ZANU-PF's symbolic bank, but also ruptures the narratives and melts imposed rigid boundaries by re/claiming the flag and giving it new meanings. Generally, oppositional political parties have failed to offer affective alternatives to the state-centric and ZANU-PF aligned narratives in the offering from ZANU-PF's public intellectuals (Tendi 2010). The #ThisFlag attempts to tap into the very affective sensibilities employed by the state and ZANU-PF.

3. Hashtag ThisFlag

The hashtag (#) symbol has emerged as a crucial expression component in popular culture (Van den Berg 2014). Initially, it was used and circulated on social media as a symbol continuously challenging and daring people to consume alcohol (Finn 2014; Mintz 2014; Van den Berg 2014). Its negative purposes resulted in some fatalities in Ireland (Finn 2014; Van den Berg 2014). The symbol's positive adaptation is linked to Bre Lideque, who after receiving a similar challenge responded by posting a video of himself doing charity work and daring people to take up the challenge (Mintz 2014; Van den Berg 2014). Subsequently, the

symbol has been used to introduce a positive discursive platform, an arena for discussions, inquiry, resistances, breaking liminal boundaries and knowledge re/constructions on social media. To date, it has been used on various social media platforms in different parts of the world to differing effects. It played an important political role during the Arab Spring (Van den Berg 2014; Theocharis 2012). It has also played a crucial socio-political role as reflected by hashtags such as BlackLivesMatter focusing on United States of America (USA) racism (Yang 2016), OccupyNigeria, a reaction against the removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria (Chaturvedi 2016), RhodesMustFall and FeesMustFall student movements in South Africa (Bosch 2016). The hashtag has become “an expression of the creation of new domains of knowledge” (Van den Berg 2014: 2). It therefore fits in well with a discursive narrative that seeks to unravel new ways of seeing the Zimbabwean flag.

The #ThisFlag movement is a campaign started by Mawarire. Unlike in the South African student protests #RhodesMustFall where Rhodes’s statue was physically uprooted (Bosch 2016; 2013), the #ThisFlag movement appreciated the legal protection of flags. Mawarire does not discard the flag and Zimbabwean history simply because the state and ZANU-PF have ab/used them. Instead, in a small personal narrative, he initiated a public discourse that challenges dominant ideas around the flag, illustrating “how an apparently small act of an individual in a local context can acquire international significance through the use of social media” (Van den Berg 2014:1). Using the flag, Mawarire refutes normative knowledge and memory production by the state and ZANU-PF through patriotic history. This speaks to ideas that the uses of symbols guide their meanings and how people perceive them, discarding notions of totalitarian and legitimate symbolic meanings (Mawere 2016; Coski 2005; Fiske 1987; Hall 1980).

Ranger (2004) examines the promotion of patriotic historiography through selective history syllabi in schools, bandwagon propaganda, especially using the public broadcaster the ZBC and state-controlled newspapers. This sought to highlight on selected historical events and figures and especially portrayed former President, Robert Mugabe as an arch-angel. This was essentially done through jingles, accounts in state-newspapers, patriotic music celebrated at national galas that were primed as ideology events meant to inculcate a sense of re-living the liberation struggle for those born after independence. Ranger argues that the government was concerned with the kind of unpatriotic history being taught

at tertiary institutions and thus introduced the national youth programmes to counter western ideologies taught in schools. In doing so, the government hyped narratives on the liberation struggle (and most importantly, the national flag, Zimbabwe bird, national shrine, Robert Mugabe himself – became instrumental symbols that helped talk about and legitimise patriotic historiography). The government also sought to stifle privately-run media accused of producing counter-narratives undermining the liberation struggle and spoiling new generations. Amidst this, social media rose to become an uncensored and unfiltered media space that accommodated previously undermined voices. The #ThisFlag, through its systematic utilisation of what binds Zimbabweans together, the flag, has managed to mobilise the national sentiment and speak of a nationalism contrary to that of the state.



Image 1: Mawarire with Zimbabwean flag (ThisFlag-IfulegiLeyi-MurezaUyu 2016).

The #ThisFlag campaign urges Zimbabweans all over the world to carry their flag in a performative act that signifies two issues. Firstly, one's love and patriotism for Zimbabwe and secondly, one's protest against the country's leadership failure and ignorance. The campaign dramatically unfolded when Mawarire, with the flag around his neck, posted a video on his Facebook page lamenting the Zimbabwean situation (Mawarire 2016). Interestingly, the video was posted on 20 April, just 2 days after the country's Independence Day on 18 April. This timing ruptures the idea of independence, giving way to important questions around freedom and independence. The dominant messaging of the flag was subverted, alluding to Storey's (1994) sentiments that texts situated in certain contexts can encourage readings linked to emerging social struggles that shake and resist the very ideologies that initially promoted them. Mawarire's video spread on Facebook (recording more than 100,000 viewers) and other social media and also managed to incite many Zimbabweans to join this act of national lament and pride. Thus, #ThisFlag attained some narrative agency,

which is 'the capacity to create stories on social media by using hashtags in a way that is collective and recognized by the public' (Yang 2016).

Around 2011, a phenomenon known as the Arab Spring uprisings exemplified the effective use of social media and smart phones in inciting and coordinating social movements against ill-governance and inequality (Tendi 2016; Van den Berg 2014). Nevertheless, Tendi argues that social media activism is not a substitute for organised political activity on the ground. Aucoin (2016) posits that there should be a clear association between social media activism and organised political resistances. Despite some claims that #ThisFlag has been limited to a social media revolution, the movement has been very pro-active on the ground as evidenced by its countless engagements with government officials, political parties, civic societies, citizens and the mainstream media. These include the Undenge Must Go petition (of 13 June 2016), a meeting with the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe governor John Mangudya attended by Mawarire and other activists in June 2016, where Mawarire started the conversation by stressing that ordinary citizens were against the introduction of bond notes into the monetary system and a video post on 6 July 2016 calling for a stay away. The movement coalesced with other campaigns like #MyZimbabwe by the MDC Youth Assembly and #Tajamuka/Sesijikile, a defiant and pro-active youth movement. This resulted in successes like the 24 June 2016 protest against the then Vice-President of Zimbabwe, Phelekezela Mphoko's hotel stay on government budget, the 6 July 2016 stay away (Aucoin 2016) and the 13 July 2016 court demonstration for Mawarire's release from incarceration. Even in South Africa, the MDC Western Cape District (MDC WC) had numerous demonstrations under #ThisFlag at the Grand Parade and the Zimbabwe Consulate offices. It is possible to see the above forms of pressure and the rise of social media as foundational to Mugabe's fall in November 2017.

Some scholars and analysts have focused on the sustainability of the #ThisFlag movement, its effectiveness in bringing a new political dispensation in Zimbabwe, its origins/history and ingenuity (Aucoin 2016; Tendi 2016). Others have focused on mobile technology's impact on communication between the rural and the urban and the relevance of the mobile economy in generating agency and effective change in Zimbabwe (Kambarami 2016). Some of these debates were generated in the context of approximately 95% mobile and 50% internet penetration ascribed to Zimbabwe by the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (POTRAZ) (Chifamba 2013; Aucoin 2016). The paper argues that when used

intelligibly, social media can complement organised political movements in fighting oppressive systems. In a study on the feminist hashtag #WhyIStayed, Clark (2016) draws on the discursive nature and connectedness of hashtag narratives that formulate agency and hope. Using #ThisFlag, the paper focuses on flag symbolism as a nuanced negotiation of space, of recognition, of presence, of nationhood and citizenship in a context where these have been apparently stagnated in the service of the ZANU-PF patriotic cult.

The paper argues that #ThisFlag movement challenged the destructive and negative flag uses by the state and ZANU-PF to make possible the more positive, open and discursive ones. In a global space where social media has inculcated a sense of community, collective identities and connectedness amongst subaltern classes amidst the confinements of conventional political spaces (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011), the paper shows some agentive democratic possibilities (Chaturvedi 2016) imbued in movements such as the #ThisFlag.

4. Re/Negotiating Citizenship or a 'Pastor's Fart in the Corridors of Power'?

The movement #ThisFlag uses the catch phrase 'hatichada, hatichatya' (we are fed up and we are no longer afraid). The sentiments by the then ZANU-PF spin doctor Jonathan Moyo that #ThisFlag is a 'pastor's fart in the corridors of power', and his counter launching of the #OurFlag campaign (Mananavire 2016) as a cosmetic measure is revealing of how #ThisFlag unsettled power. Aucoin (2016) also shares this view that the ruling party was put into a panic mood by the movement as it largely targeted the grassroots and the urban space. This panic relates to why on 6 July 2016, 'in the middle of the stay-at-home protest, instant messaging service WhatsApp was mysteriously shut down' (Aucoin 2016). Recently, in mid-January 2019 government blocked general internet access during a nationwide stay away protest on fuel increase organised by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and where Mawarire and the #ThisFlag gave a solidarity speech.

The #ThisFlag movement reveals how power does not totally reside within particular groups or individuals. Certain instruments of the powerful can equally be used by the underdogs for empowerment and to disservice the symbolic and cultural fountains sustaining dominant regimes. The use of the flag to collapse and disperse power is interesting and invites scrutiny. In Zimbabwe, the flag

is sacrosanct and is one of the most potent symbols that have for long been monopolised by ZANU-PF. By unexpectedly grabbing the flag from ZANU-PF, and re/negotiating its meanings, the #ThisFlag movement left ZANU-PF in a state of confusion and cultural shock. Allison (2016) expresses how flags on government buildings, on badges pinned on government officials and those flying on presidential motorcades turned into subversive acts inviting attention. The #ThisFlag movement turned to the flag for a platform to re/mediate nationalism and citizenship.

Evan Mawarire refuses to look at the flag from a distance. This approximates his decision to stop watching national affairs from a distance but be involved. The phrase, 'Thisflag' sensualises something proximate and Mawarire laments with a flag around his neck and pleads with citizens to carry their flags around. Being contiguous to the flag is central to post-colonial nation building. It answers to Zimbabwe's national anthem, 'Simudzai Mureza/Phakamisani iFlag,' which emphasises the centrality of the flag and calls upon Zimbabweans to keep their flag high in a sense of national pride and visibility. The lyrics of the national anthem evoke themes related to Zimbabwe's natural ecology, political history and memory. This brings complementarity and ritualised repetition with the dominant meanings of the flag's colours. The beauty and richness of the flag is synonymous to the described feminine beauty of the land/nation. Such descriptions bring a sense of pride in this attractive and fertile land/nation but it also awakens and entails some spirited necessity for protection from possible invaders. By launching these movements, activists like Mawarire are appropriating the flag and using it to critique the status quo. Oneness with the flag is very significant in Mawarire's quest for identity. He no longer hears the flag story from a distance, instead he sees, feels, experiences the flag, and hears its story from close and multiple voices. It is this experience with the flag that makes him realise the emptiness of the black colour as representing the black majority, 'And yet for some reason I don't feel like I am a part of it' (Mawarire 2016). The so-called majority rule is a fallacy, there is a visible absence and non-representation of the black majority who are not even considered as important human resources

In his lament, Mawarire displays patriotism and national pride. He appreciates the flag and therefore the nation, even though identifying with Zimbabwe makes one a laughing stock around the world. This patriotism is evidenced by phrases such as; 'This beautiful flag/I put on the colours of Zimbabwe/My Zimbabwe/I

will fight for it' (Mawarire 2016). There is a lot of effort to identify with the flag and with Zimbabwe in a way that reclaims belongingness. However, Mawarire is against the imposition of meanings from above. Those in power do not give ordinary people the chance to define the flag in their own ways but impose knowledge. This is marked by statements such as, 'They tell me that/Hanzi (They say)/The Red, they say...?' (Mawarire 2016). This imposed knowledge fails to make sense in Mawarire's world as he reveals ignorance, non-involvement, exclusion and wonder as shown by, 'I don't see any/I don't know how much/I don't know who they sold it to and how much they got for it/I don't know that if they were here/I don't feel like I am a part of it' (Mawarire 2016). There is a gap between the state and ordinary people with regards to meanings of the flag and nationhood. Mawarire laments the absence of the connectedness of the imposed meaning and the reality on the ground. The attributed meaning of the colour does not make sense as indicated by his sentiment, 'I don't see any crops in my country' (Mawarire 2016). At the same time, rampant citizen alienation from resources is reflected by 'I don't know how much of it is left' (Mawarire 2016). Resource values and outputs are secrets, reflecting overt corruption in the country.

Mawarire appreciates and recognises the sacrifices made by those who died during the war. He identifies with the country's liberation war history, which ZANU-PF has privatised and regularly turns to when justifying its hold on power. Nevertheless, Mawarire believes that blood (symbolised by the red colour on the flag), should not depict perpetual death and suffering, but re/germination, continuity of life and forward looking. He argues, 'Yes, it's blood/But not just blood/It's passionate blood/It is the will to survive/It is the resolve to carry on' (Mawarire 2016). He diverts from the dominant meaning associated with the red colour which has been narrowed and limited to sensitise patriotic history by evoking memories of suffering and death.

There is, however, hope in Mawarire's lament. After discovering the emptiness of imposed meanings, he engages in a journey of re/discovery through the national flag as he 'must look at it again with courage' (Mawarire 2016). Mawarire's courageous look at the flag manifests in his courageous critique of the nation's situation. Courageous in the sense that dominant knowledge regimes are not easily destabilised, hence it required courage for Mawarire to expose the government. He calls for a different lens to look at the flag/nation and give meanings that apply to contexts. This experience with the flag gives him some

new energy and vision. He says, 'I look at the Green and think to myself/It is not just vegetation/But the green represents the power of being able to push through soil/To push past limitations and flourish and grow' (Mawarire 2016). Meanings and horizons are widened, worked into everyday realities and the future, breaking imposed liminal shells and imagining possibilities beyond set boundaries. Thus, to Mawarire, the green colour envisages the power of life, the power to break boundaries, the power to break limitations, the power for possibilities and the power to force visibility and recognition as one fights through the hard soil crust which the Zimbabwean political field is.

It is interesting to note how street vendors quickly started selling flags in response to the rising of the #ThisFlag movement. These flags were sold on the urban space and this may be seen as a commercial act where vendors were seeking a living. However, apart from being a space for negotiating livelihood, the urban space is populated with those who are regarded national pollutants while at the same time it holds the seat of the government. The urban space is therefore a serious threat to the sitting regime. By selling the flags on the urban space, vendors who are also most hurt by the economic meltdown were indirectly participating in the movement and spreading it. Although social media helped to spread the movement, the participation of vendors on the streets cannot be overlooked. The vendors became an everyday incarnation of the presence of the movement and also made the flag available to the readily available public which has capacity to unseat the government. Since the #ThisFlag movement had invaded a sensitive and potentially dangerous space, the move by the government to criminalise the wearing of the flag, as well as its commercialisation was an act of surveillance on the urban space. Criminalising flag sales and flag ownership was an act of cleaning the urban space of too much pollutants and an act of protecting the sovereignty, authority and hegemony of the state and ZANU-PF. The #ThisFlag demonstrated such tremendous power to the extent of igniting a debate around how the flag is policed to preserve its dignity.

5. Policing the Zimbabwean Flag

The policing of the flag is currently mediated around ZANU-PF or the state on the one hand and dissenting voices on the other. The state's discourse of flag abuse follows the discourse of patriotic history that is against a critique of ZANU-

PF and the government. In the post-2000, grand discourses on Zimbabwean nationalism and citizenship took an insider/outsider dichotomy which necessitated both the obvious and insidious surveillance of people and their actions. From the 2000s, the government was deliberately silent on those who possessed and or distributed the flag or material with the flag. There seemed to be an encouragement to do this as flag possession was associated with patriotism, loyalty and the sanctioning of land occupation in the post-2000 period. It was after Mawarire's lament that the policing of the flag was heightened (Allison 2016; Munyoro 2016) and citations of the Flag of Zimbabwe Act [Chapter 10:10] began (Mugove 2016; Munyoro 2016). The #ThisFlag movement reveal how the ruling regime has deliberately made flag meanings incomplete for personal aggrandisement. There is an emerging war around the policing of the flag, associated with contestations over its symbolic underpinnings and cultural affects. ZANU-PF fights flag contamination by what it calls local pawns of the West who have succumbed to the advances of the gay West (Mawere 2016) and are ready to sell-out. The flag, which symbolises the national body which is under ZANU-PF's sole ownership, is seen to be under abuse and pollution by the MDC and any other bodies opposing the state/ZANU-PF.

The ejection from parliament of two MDC parliamentarians, Godfrey Sithole (Chitungwiza North) and Eric Murai (Highfields) by speaker Jacob Mudenda in 2016 for putting on flags around their necks is symptomatic of the governance culture that disqualifies certain people and groups from patriotic nationhood. As uttered by the then ZANU-PF Zvimba West MP, for the two MDC parliamentarians to put on the national flag is 'to belittle this country!!' (Mananavire 2016). To this, Mudenda responded by instructing the parliamentarians to 'Just place it down. I said place the Zimbabwean flag down. We have to treat it with some respect' (Mananavire 2016). Mudenda's double standards reflect that the issue is not about flag possession, but about the particular bodies possessing it. This graphically illuminates when Mudenda remains adamant even after Innocent Gonese, MDC's chief whip questions; 'some honourable members...are also wearing their flags...Langa has a pin with a Zimbabwean flag...Where is the difference because they are also flags?' (Mananavire 2016). The above discourse puts emphasis on respecting the flag to honor the country instead of belittling it. A similar parliamentary incident involved Costa Machingauta and Trevor Saruwaka of Budiriro and Mutasa Central constituencies respectively, who



introduced #ThisBhachi (ThisJacket), involving protestors putting on jackets with Zimbabwean flag colours, broadening #ThisFlag.

Image 2: MDC parliamentarian protesting under #ThisBhachi (Matigari 2016).

As symbols of identity, flags are boundary markers (Shanafelt 2009; Eriksen 2007) and they relate to political hierarchies and the politics of control (Shanafelt 2009). The selective application of regulations around the Zimbabwean flag gives a sense of possession, ownership, loyalty and belonging in that only ZANU-PF and its allies are suitable to have the flag. When others who are deemed unworthy of carrying or possessing the flag (enemies of the state) put it on, their acts are criminalised. The flag is also linked to the land and is therefore a critical instrument of citizenship and belonging and a symbol of authority. The opposition parties and Mawarire are positioned as threatening the legitimacy of the state, its history, its founding values and its resources.

The flag falls into Zimbabwe's body politics and questions of un/belonging as well as power and authority. The above incidences of denial to flag attachments are very significant in the context where the nation is feminised and respect and respectability is attached to femininity, enabling the honoring of the nation's men (Nagel 1998; Enloe 1989). A number of scholars have linked discourses of the nation/land to discourses of gender and sexuality (Lewis 2004; Nixon 1993). A belittled flag resembles a belittled nation and therefore a nation that has been adulterated or prostituted, dishonoring the nation's men who are supposed to be on guard. ZANU-PF sees it as taboo for MDC parliamentarians to touch the flag, a symbol of the nation, as this results to the erosion of national respectability. The public contact of those seen as enemies of the state and the flag is taken as a public penetration of the nation by foreign or polluted bodies which bring great dishonor. ZANU-PF articulates the impropriety for those opposing it to put on the flag as their contaminated bodies disqualify their being in touch with a symbol of nationhood, patriotism and sacrificial independence. Discourses of defilement have often been associated with the MDC and its leadership. Morgan Tsvangirai has been Anglicised and caricatured as Tsvangson or Teaboy, a

performance of foreignness, femininity, homosexuality and incapacity to govern Zimbabwe (Mawere 2019; Mawere 2016). To ZANU-PF, certain bodies are possible pollutants of the flag and Zimbabwean nationhood.

Thus, to understand the prevention of MDC parliamentarians from being proximate with the flag, it is important to reflect on how the flag is representative of the Zimbabwean nation. Drawing from discourses that associate nation with womanhood and femininity (Lewis 2004; Samuelson 2007), it becomes sensible for ZANU-PF parliamentarians to protect the woman/nation from contamination by defiled bodies. Using Ranciere's (2006) concept of the distribution of the sensible, this is naturalised in the context where ZANU-PF is ascribed the masculine status *amadoda sibili/varume chaivo* (real men). This makes ZANU-PF fit and duty-bound to defend the nation whereas the MDC is labelled homosexual, polluted by Western men and unmanly, hence unqualified to speak for the nation. The necessity for the MDC parliamentarians to put the flag away is symbolic of the call to disassociate themselves from the nation. The call for national defence is the responsibility of ZANU-PF members who possess the right to be proximate with the nation as acted by the right they have to put on the national flag on their pure bodies. For the MDC to have a close relationship with the flag/nation is an abomination that is counter-reproductive and dangerous for Zimbabwe. The policing of the flag by the ZANU-PF dominated parliament dramatises nationhood and citizenship denial to those seen as state opponents. This is why Mugabe instructed Mawarire to leave the country (HOPE TV 2016) as his critique of the ZANU-PF led government was regarded Western generated, making him defiled and non-citizen.

The government acknowledges the sensual affects drawn from flag symbolism. This is why the flag has to be policed to avoid negative messaging done through its ab/use. Mawarire is seen as unfit for the flag and using it for disobedient messaging as he is "using the flag to whip up political emotions against the constitutionally elected government" (Munyoro 2016). Virginia Mabhiza, the permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary affairs warned that those involved in flag ab/use through unsanctioned manufacturing, distribution and use face prosecution (Withnow 2016; Munyoro 2016). Mabhiza argued "The national flag is a symbolic representation of national strength and unity of any given country, which should be treated with so much respect" (Munyoro 2016). Evident is the control of symbolic and cultural products through

their manufacturing and distribution which promotes and safe-guards patriotic history. This is an attempt for the policing and surveillance of flag meanings and sensual affects as well as the policing and surveillance of citizens. To ZANU-PF's imaginations, for opponents to have the flag is equivalent to having the flag soiled, which is a sign of national conquest. As such, national men should protect the flag as they would protect their women from being raped or penetrated by outsiders.

Dissenting voices like the #ThisFlag have a different way of policing the national flag. For them, the integrity of the flag as a symbol of life and continuous struggle for existence should be guarded through responsible leadership. To this extent, *hatichada* (we are sick and tired) is a refusal of flag abuses and *hatichatya* (we are now fearless, we will not stand aside and watch) is preparedness to protect the flag from abuse and exposing all forms of its abuse as well as those smearing the flag with mud. Flag abuses include irresponsible, insensitive, corrupt and selfish public officials and all forms of citizen oppression and neglect. This flag policing ruptures the state-symbolic meaning of the flag that narrows it to patriotic history and instead, opens up to new meanings that are responsive to contexts and have the capacity to empower citizens. Mawarire's lament re/presents a different way of policing the flag from one offered by the state/ZANU-PF. The alternative messaging behind the flag is about respecting the founding values of the nation, correcting socio-political-economic ills and a restoration of democracy.

The symbolic choice by the #ThisFlag movement triggered a policing of the flag by the state that aims to retain and protect its coding with patriotic history. Thus, sensual and cultural meanings are policed in a manner that promotes ZANU-PF patronage and naturalise relations of domination. The denial to claim ownership and use of the flag by dissenting voices is a symbolic withdrawal and denial of nationhood and citizenship to the feminised ZANU-PF opponents. This is why ZANU-PF loyalists are technically allowed to use the flag while perceived opponents are highly censored. Being a ZANU-PF loyalist makes one a national, a citizen, part of *amadoda sibili* and therefore qualifying to own and use national symbols and national cultures to articulate identities and representations. The #ThisFlag movement has managed to strike at the heart of Zimbabwe's invented tradition. Although the state/ZANU-PF continues to be gate-keepers, for example, of the Heroes Acre, determining who is buried there

and who is not, the hold on the flag has been challenged by #ThisFlag.

The wearing of the flag by Zimbabwe's current president, Emmerson Mnangagwa and his new dispensation is counter-intuitive and an act of defending ZANU-PF hegemony. At some point during the Mugabe era, putting the flag on was viewed as a criminal offence, yet Mnangagwa decriminalises this by putting it on as a scarf, which makes it permissible that when the party wears the flag it is not a criminal offense or violation of the flag/nation/state sovereignty. The threat of the #ThisFlag movement and the emergence of the new dispensation triggered the 'new-old' dispensation to include the flag in its regalia since the president now consistently wears the flag on his neck as a scarf. The same is seen in cabinet ministers such as Finance Minister Mthuli Ncube, who has been used to characterise the newness of the Mnangagwa regime, owing to the fact that he was appointed from outside the party. This adaption of the flag is an attempt to protect it and state sovereignty from new and outside actors that threaten the hegemony of ZANU-PF. At the time the #ThisFlag movement arose, in other parts of the Global South there had been several movements emerging and challenging ruling parties and in some instances leading to the removal of political leaders in power. The rise of Mawarire and the use of the flag for his movement had such a provocative attack on the existence and hegemony of the ZANU-PF regime. This is why Mnangagwa is presenting himself as the comeback or rebirth of the nationalist movement ZANU-PF but also its resilience to invasions or subversions from erupting movements. Carrying the scarf which has colours of the flag even in hot and uncomfortable weather is a re/branding strategy that is not only trying to foster patriotism, but also reinforce patriotic history, Mnangagwa's resilience, determination and authority and the resilience, relevance and authority of the ZANU-PF party, especially where the flag is synonymous to its rule.

6. Conclusions: Melting Boundaries

As reflected by some examples drawn in other parts of the African continent and globally, citizens' rising to the excesses of dominant regimes is inevitable. Although the effectiveness and sustenance of these uprisings vary and are subject to debate, the mobilisations are tremendous and often subaltern. The #ThisFlag movement has contributed in rallying ordinary Zimbabweans against

government rot and ignorance.

The symbolic and fluid meanings of the flag and its sensual effects generated radical power and landed it into a struggle space that triggered more policing by the state. The #ThisFlag movement prompted the politically isolated to partake in governance issues. Moving away from mainstream party politics that produce political binaries of insider and outsider, #ThisFlag captured a unique form of political activism that unites citizens around common suffering and aspirations. The paper has argued that the turn to symbolic and subtle forms of protests has made some strides in inviting formerly non-participants to the political landscape. Also, the use of one of ZANU-PF's most potent symbols of patronage has enabled very intelligible messaging under the very noses of ZANU-PF machinery. Generally, the state has used the flag to symbolise the Zimbabwean nation which basically is comprehended through land and gender discourses to proffer the politics of national fecundity, protection and survival. Mawarire has contributed to the uncovering of subjects' agency within the very instrument of control incessantly used by Zanu-PF. The Zimbabwean future requires an intelligent of networks amongst organised political groups and movements that are not clearly political but banking on the nation's symbolic and cultural archives. Overt political organisations have failed to attract and appeal to the affective sensibilities of ordinary citizens. It is possible that not so gross political involvements such as that spearheaded by Mawarire, although limited in terms of the needed political organisation and capacity to solely cause change, have the capacity to add, not necessarily more following for the opposition but more votes for it by reducing voter apathy. This strength lies in the use of subtle instruments that invite subtle involvement in national politics. The inherent ambiguous and fluid messaging in #ThisFlag appeals to diverse individuals and groups who may end up using the message and sense-making in diverse forms and all together, exerting pressure on the incumbent regimes of power.

There is some agency in the reading of the flag in Mawarire's terms. In Zimbabwe, the MDC arose and tried to bring change through the ballot. However, the ballot its self has been used as an instrument of state and ZANU-PF legitimacy and authority. The #ThisFlag's emphasis is on the rise of citizens and focus is mainly on the urban space which has the seat of government and also multitudes of those who compete to take the seat of government like supporters of opposition parties. The urban space emanates as a space where agency is

located. I argue that Robert Mugabe's displacement, although it might have failed to change the governance system and culture, was partly made possible by efforts from movements such as the #ThisFlag. The current strict surveillance of the urban space by the new old dispensation of Mnangagwa acknowledges the power of the urban space and the power of citizen movements and uprisings.

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