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State apologies, postcolonial resistance and ontological insecurity: the Matabeleland massacre

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ABSTRACT

Building on the causal relationship between ontological (in)security and state apology, this article explores the Zimbabwean government's refusal to apologise for the state-sanctioned Matabeleland massacre. First, I situate the Zimbabwean government's response to the demand for an apology within the multifarious ontological insecurities it is grappling with in its relationship with both domestic and international actors. Second, I argue that the Zimbabwean government has refocused and repurposed this ontological insecurity-induced refusal to apologise to fulfil contemporary ontological and political exigencies. It has become a site for postcolonial resistance and domestic legitimisation in which well-rehearsed anti-Western sentiments, anti-imperialism and faux Pan-Africanism are built around the apology discourse to switch the focus from rectifying the wrongs of the past to opposing the unfinished Western civilising project. Such postcolonial posturing contains internal contradictions, particularly in reproducing oppressive and exclusionary politics domestically, and endangering the victims' ontological security. Moreover, the continuous demands for a national apology by surviving victims and families of the deceased threaten the state's sense of self. The article thereby identifies the practice of state apologies, particularly the refusal of apology, as a critical discursive site where contemporary postcolonial politics are negotiated, reproduced and sustained.

Introduction

The growing significance of political apology as a strategic tool for image management and conflict resolution has generated broad multidisciplinary discussions and debates (see Bentley 2016; Daase et al. 2015). Apologising for human rights violations has undeniably gained traction, primarily because there is a contemporary normative imperative for democracies to address their past and renounce deeds that contradict their liberal complexion (Bentley 2016, 3). Over the past several decades, both inter- and intra-state colonial apologies have been offered for both historical and contemporary injustices.[1] Belgium and Italy have apologised to the Democratic Republic of Congo and Libya, respectively, for colonial

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wrongdoings. Moreover, settler states such as Canada and Australia have apologised for colonial injustices against Indigenous populations.

Despite being susceptible to abuse, much of the scholarship on state apology is optimistic regarding its invaluable role in conflict resolution, peace-making, reconciliation and restorative processes (Nobles 2008). This optimism is centred on the understanding that while apologies cannot undo the past, they can heal the wound of injustices, reaffirm the dignity of victims, and restore broken relationships. Apology, so the optimistic literature contends, opens a new chapter for all parties to the conflict to renegotiate their shared past and helps to underscore the possibility of peaceful co-existence based on mutual respect and understanding. Despite the increasing number of instances of apologetic gestures, and the positive reception of these, some states are still reluctant to apologise for past transgressions. Also, much of the postcolonial scholarship on state apologies concentrates on, and critiques, Western democracies' contrition for their colonial past (Bentley 2016). There has been less analysis from the perspective of an adjudged illiberal postcolonial perpetrator state. This article addresses this empirical gap by examining the postcolonial Zimbabwean government's refusal to apologise for the Gukurahundi massacre.

The article examines the socio-political, rhetorical utterances and broader discursive processes through which the Zimbabwean government and its representatives ascribe meaning to the demand for apology. I argue that ontological security needs have made the Zimbabwean government occidentalise an internal problem, which it mobilises for postcolonial resistance and domestic legitimisation. The government construes domestic demands for apology for the Matabeleland massacre as a clash between Zimbabwe, Western powers and their domestic allies. Domestic demands thus provide a contrasting background against which successive Zimbabwean governments project their self-acclaimed anti-imperialist image. The well-rehearsed anti-Western, anti-imperialism and faux Pan-Africanism serve to switch the focus from rectifying the wrongs of the past to opposing the unfinished Western civilising project. This locale of postcolonial resistance is not without internal contradiction: the self-serving evocation of resistance rhetoric has a colonial dimension and a silencing effect on the actual victims of the Matabeleland massacre. In this respect, the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse built around the refusal to apologise reproduces internal inequalities and historical dynamics of domination. It discursively and structurally sets up a 'definably internal colonial relationship whereby certain voices cannot be heard, while other voices try to speak for those who are silenced' (Bertrand 2018, 281). Consequently, the postcolonial moment, which involves disempowered groups resisting oppressive governments, becomes obstructed.

The article is structured as follows: it begins by providing a contextual background of the massacre and the rationale behind the selection of this case study. It then establishes a conceptual connection between the demand for apology, ontological insecurity and state identity. The following section traces the root of the Zimbabwean government's ontological insecurity. It then examines how the ontological security-laden denial of the Matabeleland massacre has become an instance of postcolonial politics expressed in the language of anti-Western and Pan-Africanism, and how this affects the stable sense of self of the Matabeleland massacre victims.

The Matabeleland massacre in perspective

Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) government was confronted with the intricate task of merging three contending armed forces[2] with dissimilar ethnic configurations and unique military structures into the Zimbabwe National Army as contained in the Lancaster House Agreement of 1979. The two nationalist liberation forces – Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) and Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) – fought together against the Rhodesian government in the Liberation War. While ZIPRA focused on the Ndebele-speaking region, ZANLA operated in the Shona-speaking region. This, however, does not suggest that they were somehow tribalist. Instead, as the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and Legal Resources Foundation's (1999, 27) Report indicates, 'both Shona-speakers and Ndebele-speakers could be found in both groups, but increasingly regional recruitment, together with mutual antagonism, led to a growing association between ZAPU and Ndebele-speakers'. The pre-independence history of mistrust and antagonism coupled with the ensuing intermittent post-independence fighting between the two liberation forces made the post-independence demobilisation, integration and unification of the different armed wings into the Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) a complicated and exasperating mission.

The Entumbane conflicts of 1980 and 1981 spurred large-scale defections of ex-ZIPRA combatants, who cited fears over their personal security and obvious ZANU government special directives that favoured ZANLA ex-combatants. Many ex-ZIPRA combatants deserted the ZNA and began an insurgent and dissent campaign in Matabeleland. Mugabe's government disproportionately responded to these groups of disgruntled ex-ZIPRA soldiers by unleashing the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade to crush the alleged dissidents in Matabeleland and in parts of the Midlands Provinces (CCJP and LRF 1999, 142). The Fifth Brigade were deployed to Matabeleland North in 1983 and then to Matabeleland South in 1984 under the operation code-named Gukurahundi. Many unarmed civilians, mostly Ndebele people, fell victim to the unit's atrocities. By the end of their operation, between 10,000 and 20,000 unarmed Ndebele people had been killed and numerous dehumanising atrocities had been committed (CCJP and LRF 1999, 47). The signing of the Unity Accord in 1987 by then Prime Minister Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo (leaders of the two political factions – ZANU and ZAPU) led to a cessation of hostilities.

The Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front's (ZANU-PF) government has persistently denied these allegations and refused to offer an official apology for the Matabeleland massacre. The official position of the Zimbabwean government has been that the Gukurahundi operation that led to the carnage was initiated to deal with the dissident activities of former war combatants (ex-ZIPRA) who posed a severe threat to the political existence, sovereignty and stability of Zimbabwe. Successive Zimbabwean governments see the deployment of the Fifth Brigade as a reaction to a wide range of existential challenges confronting the country. They have continuously insisted, despite wide-ranging criticisms, that the already implemented reconciliatory mechanisms[3] are sufficient closure for that dark period. However, demands from the surviving victims, communities, non-governmental organisations, opposition party and international actors for the Zimbabwean government to right its wrongs are strong indications that the psychological and physical scars of the Gukurahundi operation are far from healed (Rwafa 2012, 315).

Extant literature on the Gukurahundi massacre is situated within the narrative that 'troubled societies cannot fully reconcile as long as pre-existing grievances are not addressed' (Tshuma 2015, 308). Such literature[4] is critical of the Zimbabwean government's refusal to

apologise, highlighting the importance of acknowledging the atrocities with other reconciliatory gestures and peace in Zimbabwe. Du Plessis and Ford (2009) argue that the Zimbabwean government is not actually interested in dealing with the past. It is interested in advancing narratives and gestures that encourage forgetting rather than healing because many of the perpetrators are still in power. Therefore, dealing with the past is seen as self-implicating. In a jointly produced report on the Gukurahundi massacre, the CCJP and LRF (2007, 5) said that 'only when those who inflicted untold hardship are prepared to acknowledge that they did so, can a lasting reconciliation take place between all who live in Zimbabwe'. According to Mashingaidze (2005, 87), 'the foundation of reconciliation is the recognition of suffering, which distinguishes reconciliation from a process which does not go beyond political negotiations and compromises of political elites'. The Unity Accord of 1987 is often seen as an elitist and top-down reconciliation mechanism, lacking grassroots legitimisation. The absence of bottom-up healing, justice and reconciliation will ensure that the trauma of the massacre is passed down through generations, igniting a strong passion for revenge and a high level of mistrust (Ngwenya and Harris 2015).

Killander and Nyathi (2015) unpack the legal hurdles put in place by the government to prevent accountability and the legal opportunities available for surviving victims of the massacre. Despite these domestic legal and civil difficulties, victims can seek redress at the international level. While acknowledging the need for a sustained call for national apology, Tarusarira (2019, 206) cautioned about an empty apology from the Zimbabwean government and advocated for a transformative apology capable of 'transforming the cognitive and epistemic subjectivities underpinning wrongdoing'. The non-recognition of the Gukurahundi atrocities will continue to undermine reconciliation, unity and peace in the country because the post-conflict sentiment in Matabeleland is one of exclusion and resentment. This article adds to this growing critique of the Zimbabwean government's reticence to apologise for the Matabeleland massacre by drawing attention to how their ontological security-seeking denial is creating ontological insecurity for the victims.

Why the Zimbabwe case?

Over the last 30 years, it has repeatedly been said that we are living in an 'age of apology' (Brooks 1999). The 'age of apology' may be a misnomer; among Western states, for instance, France has been reluctant to apologise for its colonial atrocities in Algeria, and Britain has yet to apologise for the Amritsar massacre or colonialism more broadly. But even if there has been resistance to certain apologies in the West, the trend towards state contrition has been far from geographically even. In fact, as a new database on historical apologies demonstrates, intrastate apologies in postcolonial African states are extremely rare (Schaafsma and Zoodsma 2021). It is this resistance to state apology among postcolonial African states that is of central interest here. A notorious problem of analysing the absence of a rare phenomenon (in this case, the absence of state apology in postcolonial African states) is that there is large universe of case studies that the researcher may choose to examine.

In choosing the Zimbabwean case study here, the case study selection is guided by both empirical and theoretical concerns. First, engaging the question of what makes certain states reticent to apologise for their historical atrocities requires exploring an empirical case where there is an evident demand for, and refusal of, apology. This case clearly meets this criterion in the sense that there has been a vocal domestic constituency demanding apology

(Murambadoro 2015). Second, political apology decisions are dependent on the extent to which the expected outcome(s) overlaps with state interest in both material and ideational terms (Lind 2008). In this case study, the cost–benefit analysis in material terms is insufficient to explain the decision of the Zimbabwean government. This is because there are identifiable material incentives to apologise and material costs in refusing to apologise for the Zimbabwean government. Therefore, for a country that has been grappling with deep economic crises, it is expected from a materialist perspective that the Zimbabwean government will pursue actions that demonstrate progress in democratic and human rights reforms to regain the trust of international investors and foreign governments. Obviously, apologising for the Matabeleland massacre would not miraculously resolve the country's economic problems, but it would provide a platform to re-engage the international community. Thus, it is puzzling why the Zimbabwean government is pursuing actions that jeopardise its material interest. In this sense, I have opted for the Zimbabwean case study because it serves as an illustrative example of ontological security concerns trumping material interests.

Third, where the focus in the apology literature has mostly been on Western liberal states, this case offers the rare opportunity to focus the analytical lens on an adjudged illiberal non-Western state. It is normally assumed that, unlike their counterparts, Western democracies are predisposed to apologising for human rights violations. Illiberal non-Western states are assumed to lack the necessary propelling democratic mechanisms and structures that engender the rendering of apology (Daase et al. 2015). Consequently, it could be considered counterintuitive to expect the Zimbabwean government to apologise, precisely because of its illiberal political system marked by 'antipathy towards norms of liberal governance and disdain for human rights and democracy' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009b, 1139). While acknowledging the influence of a political system and leader's disposition on an apology decision, I suggest that overlooking such cases limits the scope of empirical and theoretical analysis on state apologies. This is not to say that the erratic or oppressive behaviour of such people as Robert Mugabe is insignificant. But this case study offers the opportunity to analytically consider other variables that influence the apology decision beyond the constraints of the domestic political system.

Finally, the Zimbabwe case is also different from the typical structure of African participation in the contemporary international politics of regret. Postcolonial African states have always been at the receiving end of the apologetic transaction. The regular pattern has been of erstwhile colonial masters apologising for specific human rights violations during the colonial era. But the Zimbabwe case involves the demand for a postcolonial African state to apologise for atrocities committed against a section of its population. It therefore reverses the typical structure of state responsibility in historical apologies. The case offers us the opportunity to move beyond the West–non-West self–other schism to understand the construction and weaponisation of the internal self–other relationship. The denial policy of postcolonial Zimbabwe is not only a tool for rendering others 'foreign'; it is also a framework within which the state manages its day-to-day relationship with its internal significant others.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study aimed at understanding what makes successive Zimbabwean governments so reticent to apologise for the Gukurahundi massacre and the implications of such actions for the deceased victims and surviving families of those killed. It explores

motivations concealed behind social practices such as the demand for and refusal of apology. While the historical reality of the massacre cannot be denied, it cannot, however, be grasped separate from the perception and interpretation of the Zimbabwean government, surviving victims, wider society, and other social actors. Consequently, I examine the historically and socially negotiated meanings, interpretations, actions and perceptions of all participating actors.

The article delivers the analysis by drawing on secondary data, which includes empirical materials that exist in textual form both written and transcribed. I collected my data from the socio-political, rhetorical utterances and broader discursive processes through which the state and its representatives articulate and express their perception and the meaning they attribute to the phenomenon. The analysis relies on data collected from official publications on the official website of the Zimbabwean government; official twitter handles of the government, relevant ministries, agencies, and official interviews and speeches given by government representatives. The article also relies on data from online newspaper publications, relevant journal articles and books that are tailored specifically to the issue.

Ontological (in)security, state identity and political apologies

The consensus emerging from the international relations (IR) ontological security literature is that, in addition to physical security, states as well as individuals have a fundamental need to create, sustain and protect a stable self-identity (see, among others, Kinnvall 2004; Steele 2005; Mitzen 2006b; Rumelili 2015; Subotić 2016). Since its introduction in IR, the insights of the theory have informed several empirical studies and illuminated discussions on several topical issues in IR. Mitzen (2006b, 342) refers to ontological security as 'the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to realize a sense of agency'. Ontological security is a relational process that entails 'having a consistent sense of self and having that sense affirmed by others' (Zarakol 2010, 6).

However, critical situations dislocate these identity-stabilising routines, generating a feeling of ontological insecurity – the fear of uncertainty that endangers identity. Here, 'critical situations' refer to circumstances that social actors find threatening to their sense of self. They are routine-destabilising forces that 'radically disrupt the accustomed routine of daily life' (Giddens 1984, 124). The feeling of ontological insecurity is an existential problem that spurs individuals to engage in scheming ways to protect their self-identity and achieve stability. The importance of stable self-identity to the exercise of agency makes some states to purposefully engage in self-defeating actions to avoid compromising their agency. In certain situations, some states may not want to 'escape dilemmatic conflicts' (Mitzen 2006b, 341) because of the certitude and constancy that emanate from such prolonged conflicts and deep-rooted conflictual relationships. And since stable self-understanding enables a state 'to have goals, assess the environment and make choices' (Mitzen 2006a, 272), some states become deeply attached to the stable habitual routines that emanate from such conflicts and conflictual relationships, to the extent that breaking away from them generates ontological insecurity.

The existing IR literature on ontological security disagrees on the referent object of ontological security. This problem is inextricably intertwined with the broader state-as-person debate in IR.[5] Unsurprisingly, most IR readings and empirical applications of ontological

security primarily concentrate on statist ontology, relying on the 'as if' version of the state personification debate. Steele (2005) and Mitzen (2006b) see the scaling of the concept from its individual root to state-level analysis as unproblematic, admitting that states are persons in a metaphorical sense. The above position has been criticised by some IR scholars, arguing that the internal processes of the two referent objects (individual and state) are subject to a different logic, which makes scaling up from the former to the latter problematic (Krolikowski 2008, 111). It is at the individual level that we can understand how collective identities like nationalism and religion are being mobilised by vulnerable individuals to (re)affirm their sense of self-identity in the context of globalisation (see Kinnvall 2004, 2006).

The concept has been deployed by African scholars at the individual and state level to understand various aspects of African politics and society. Gukurume (2022, 2) deployed ontological security in his attempt to explain how international migrant students mobilise Pentecostalism to grapple with the everyday existential trepidation of studying and living in a hostile South African environment. Dirsuweit (2007) has also deployed the concept of ontological insecurity to explain the numerous implications of road closures in Johannesburg, especially the impact on the way the city and its residents deal with differences. In this article, I bestow no ontological primacy on either referent object. I recognise the numerous connections and considerable overlaps that exist between them. On the one hand, focusing on the individual level permits us to explore how the frontiers of subjectivity are endlessly redefined. On the other hand, the state-level analysis provides an insight into macro-level patterns of state actions, as well as how state identity is institutionally and discursively constructed, and (re)negotiated within the domestic and international sphere.

Demands for apology are 'critical situations' that disrupt the protective cocoon that sustain the self-identity of the perpetrator state. Political apologies are both face-supportive and face-threatening. In the face-supportive context, apology becomes a useful remedial tool for image management and identity reconstruction. How an agent responds to ontological security-threatening critical situations depends on its basic trust and mode of attachment to the routines. A healthy basic trust system gives social actors some level of predictability, confidence and order, which empowers them to think and act innovatively, and to move on with life amid unpredictable social realities. Consequently, the interplay of apology and ontological security becomes not really about the question of stable identity but about adaptability. For example, post-war Germany distanced itself from the identity of Nazi Germany through apology and financial restitution, which demonstrated a strong gesture of recommitment to international moral.

On the other hand, social agents with low trust respond differently to demands for apology. They adhere strictly to their identity and are unlikely to alter their routines and narratives because of the perceived fear that change is potentially destructive and harmful. They are predisposed to 'a rigid mode of attachment and can "fetishise" their routines' (Rossdale 2015, 374) to dispel the presumed pandemonium that lies in wait on the other side of those routines. The refusal to apologise sits perfectly within the above context. States with low basic trust are emotionally attached to their routines to the extent that the thought of their disruption generates a feeling of ontological insecurity. The significance of routines to a stable identity leads some states to purposefully engage in self-defeating actions to avoid compromising their agency. In other words, when constructed as an attempt to realise one's sense of agency, conflictual relationships and norm-violating behaviours can be sources of ontological security.

Persistent demands for atonement threaten the positive self-image of the alleged perpetrator state. These demands create a responsibility for the accused state to (re)align and (re)interpret its histories in the light of contemporary norms. This responsibility sometimes produces in the accused state a feeling of embarrassment, shame and humiliation. Zarakol (2010) links the Turkish government's refusal to apologise for the Armenian genocide to their stigmatised incorporation into the hierarchical international society. Their stigmatised status, which generates a national feeling of shame, makes them sensitive to identity-related issues like the demand for an apology. Zarakol explains that although apologising may have potential material benefits, it has an ontological cost and it is this cost, the ontological one, that outweighs the material cost of not apologising.

In this article, I recognise that ontological security needs can be mobilised to justify both the rendering and the denial of apology. Ontological security is deployed in this article because of the features of the case study: the material explanation has proved analytically insufficient to explain why the Zimbabwean government has refused to apologise. This article does not seek to diminish the explanatory power of material factors but to complement it through the argument that, sometimes, especially in this case study, ideational concerns trump material interest. The apology decision of the Zimbabwean government is driven by ontological needs that have compelled it to pursue actions that are irrational from a materialist perspective. In other words, an ontological (in)security perspective shifts the focus from the constraint of the political system and leaders' erratic personality to the underpinning routines, power relations, epistemologies and narratives that shape the practical consciousness of the parties involved in the discourse (Rumelili 2015).

The source of postcolonial Zimbabwe's ontological insecurity

The focus on Zimbabwe's illiberal system of government or Mugabe's oppressive rule tends to preclude an interrogation and examination of other historical and structural factors capable of orienting its response to the demand for apology. This focus does not consider the complexities of Zimbabwe's colonial encounter and how it shapes the consciousness of political leaders and postcolonial politics in Zimbabwe. It is important to understand the entrenched and manifold ontological concerns of postcolonial Zimbabwe. Decades of identity-forming and destabilising processes shaped the identity of postcolonial Zimbabwe, which could shed light on why the Zimbabwean government frames domestic demands for apology as an extension of the Western colonising mission. Decades of British imperialism and White minority oppressive rule produced a postcolonial Zimbabwe with an ingrained feeling of ontological insecurity. Therefore, its postcolonial politics is aimed at addressing one of the most prominent sets of questions that emerged out of colonialism – the question of identity. Colonialism in Zimbabwe was deeply rooted in a powerful blend of ideology and material interest. It was perfected through the adoption, implementation and institutionalisation of various segregating and discriminatory laws aimed at promoting White interests at the expense of those of the native population.

For example, the Master and Servant Ordinance of 1901 and the Natives Pass Ordinance of 1902 were designed to exploit and manipulate the Black labour force. Mlambo (2019, 11) states that the Master and Servant Ordinance 'regulate[s] the relation between White masters and African servants in ways that give the former unchallenged control over the latter'. The Land Apportionment Act of 1930 barred natives from buying or occupying lands in

designated White regions (Zvobgo 2009, 139–140). The psychological effects of these demeaning and repressive colonial laws produced the collective need to achieve political independence and gain access to economic resources and land. The ensued Zimbabwe War of Liberation is seen as a 'historically necessary conclusion to the struggle between "the" people and the forces of racism and colonialism' (Phimister 2012, 27).

Decades of domination and resistance struggle produced a postcolonial Zimbabwean state with a deep-rooted feeling of ontological insecurity and burning desire to make itself recognised. The psychological effects of colonialism or culture politics 'underwrite the formation of certain patterns of human values, discourse, attitudes, actions and relationships' (Gates and Jarrett 2007, 2) in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Admittedly, Zimbabwe, like most African countries, is 'positioned in a turbulent existential insecurity precisely because of its constrained agency and diminutive feeling of self-worth derived from colonial history and its duress' (Untalan 2020, 44). The refutation of human rights allegations and refusal to apologise have become handy political and policy choices to confront the impeding ontological insecurity that emanates from the racialised international order. However, it would be misleading to conclude reductively that Zimbabwe's postcolonial crisis, especially its reluctance to atone for past human rights abuse, can only be explained as the tragedies of colonialism and modern global governance. One problem with such analysis is that it suggests that postcolonial Zimbabwean political elites are 'passive accomplices and victims of circumstances' (Musingafi, Tom, and Muranda 2013, 18). While the anxiety-laden consequences of colonisation and global coloniality left profound traces in the consciousness of postcolonial Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwean government has articulated and mobilised this feeling of ontological insecurity and the yearning for recognition into irreflexive denial routines to suppress domestic opposition and criticism.

The refusal of apology: an instance of postcolonial politics

The demand for apology sits at the intersection of two conversations in international politics. On the one hand, it operates in an interventionist international system wherein efforts are channelled towards promoting democracy and human rights, particularly in illiberal countries. International legitimacy is somehow contingent on the willingness of states to embrace some form of responsibilities like protecting and promoting democratic principles, as well as preventing the violation of human rights. Apologising for human rights violations is seen as part of that preventive project. On the other hand, there is a growing turn to a postcolonial rhetoric aimed at interrogating 'the structural, systemic, cultural, discursive and epistemological patterns of domination and exploitation that have engulfed the postcolonial world' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013a, 3). Colonial-like power relations, ideologies and epistemologies of modernity and their various means of manifestation are facing severe structural interrogation. The Zimbabwean government has constructed hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse around the demand for and denial of apology. At the domestic level, the Zimbabwean government occidentalises the Matabeleland massacre for domestic hegemonic discourse and legitimacy. This, in turn, serves as a tool for constructing a counter-hegemonic narrative at the international level.

The concept of ontological security is grounded on the continuous reflexive narrative of the self – 'a story or stories by means of which self-identity is reflexively understood, both by the individual concerned and by others' (Giddens 1991, 243). In times of ontological

insecurity, states mobilise these comforting stories about the self that draw upon national histories and experiences to fulfil ontological needs (Delehanty and Steele 2009, 523). They serve as 'anxiety-controlling mechanisms that reinforce a sense of trust, productivity, and control in reaction to disruptive change' (Kinnvall 2004, 746). States reconstruct their historical memories in times of dwindling legitimacy and ontological insecurity to reinforce their image and ensure continuous loyalty and solidarity among citizens. They selectively and strategically activate some elements of, or whole, narratives at periods of profound uncertainty to sustain their ontological security (Subotić 2016, 611).

The Zimbabwean government has insisted that the narration and assessment of the Gukurahundi should be made within the context of threats to its sovereign identity. In 2006, the Publicity Secretary of ZANU-PF, Nathan Shamuyarira, said that the Gukurahundi operation is 'not regrettable… they [Fifth Brigade] were doing a job to protect the people' (quoted in Mail and Guardian 2014). Robert Mugabe only expressed regret about the 'inadvertent' consequences of the Gukurahundi operation during the funeral of Joshua Nkomo in 1999, describing the Matabeleland massacre as 'a moment of madness' (see Murambadoro 2015, 50–55). According to Mugabe, 'the conflict which took place caused great suffering among innocent people. We regret that, but these conflicts always do that' (quoted in BBC 2000). This deliberate attempt to recontextualise the Matabeleland massacre by Mugabe and ZANU-PF representatives is aimed at depicting the atrocities committed during the Gukurahundi operation as normal, logical and unavoidable. The deployment of the 'act of war' narrative is deceptively used to evade culpability.

For Mugabe, one of the threats to Zimbabwe's ontological security was the demands espoused in the form of Western liberal democracy. He was critical of the alleged hypocrisy entrenched within the promotion of Western liberal democracy. Mugabe regarded Western liberal democracy as a Machiavellian form of paternalistic interposition into Zimbabwe's domestic politics, calculated to breed division. The ZANU-PF government, especially under Robert Mugabe, is known for responding to and brushing off accusations of human rights violations with counteraccusations. For Mugabe, it is ironic that 'those who falsely accuse us of these violations are themselves international perpetrators of genocide, acts of aggression and mass destruction' (quoted in The Telegraph 2008). He once asked, 'What lesson on democracy am I supposed to learn from a continent and imperialist states that would give none to me and my countrymen during centuries of occupationist rule?' (Mugabe 2001, 18). Cognisant of the historical and contemporary contestations around postcolonial redress, the ZANU-PF-led government under Mugabe skilfully shifted the political debate on the Matabeleland massacre into a more complicated and emotive discourse. The Matabeleland massacre was caught up in the ZANU-PF government's faux effort to erect a pan-African ideology and anti-imperialist movement.

The Mugabe-led government conflated every domestic call for apology for the Matabeleland massacre with the alleged Western imperialist ambition to recolonise Zimbabwe. Mugabe established an 'anti-imperialist solidarity around his domestic political project' (Phimister and Raftopoulos 2004, 380). For instance, Phelekezela Mphoko, in his capacity as vice-president (2014–2017), linked the Gukurahundi to a 'wider conspiracy formulated within the context of the Cold War politics that sought to discredit Black Nationalist rule as informed by Socialist and Communist ideological underpinnings' (quoted in The Sunday News 2015). He said that the post-independence violence that rocked the Matabeleland region and parts of Midlands in the 1980s 'was not because of President

Mugabe's problem, it was a Western conspiracy to destabilise the newly independent state of Zimbabwe' (quoted in Maponga 2015). He remarked, 'You can never hear the British condemning that – never! They can't say anything. They never said anything. They never condemned anything because it was their baby' (quoted in The Sunday News 2015). As a result of this framing, domestic dissenting voices that demand for apology are seen as servants of the imperialist West, working to undermine Zimbabwe's sovereign identity (Maponga 2015).

At this juncture, it is important to note that Mugabe's alleged resistance to and critique of Western liberal democratic principles has a very clear temporality. At independence, Mugabe was the darling of the West and was honoured for foregrounding a democratic and reconciliatory approach embedded in a liberal Western democratic ethos. This changed in the late 1990s with the implementation of the fact-track land reform programme and the later formation of a strong opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which offered fierce political competition to ZANU-PF. This gravitated Mugabe towards authoritarianism, patriotic history and a fierce critique of Euro-American democracy. Mugabe's toxic leadership traits were apparent from the beginning, but the signs were ignored by the West for reasons of political and economic exigency (Tendi 2011).

Within domestic politics, the Zimbabwean government treats the Gukurahundi massacre as a chapter closed with the signing of the Unity Accord of 1987. Mugabe said that signing the Unity Accord means that Zimbabweans have decided not 'to go by the past except as a record or register. The record will remind us of what never to do. If it was wrong, if that went against the sacred tenets of humanity, we must never repeat' (quoted in Mashingaidze 2010, 23). As a result, every discussion of the Matabeleland massacre and demand for apology is considered 'against the spirit of national unity and reconciliation' (Ncube and Siziba 2017, 232). Mugabe said, 'If we dig up history, then we wreck the nation, we tear our people apart into factions, into tribes, and villagism will prevail over our nationalism and over the spirit of our sacrifices' (quoted in Mashingaidze 2010, 23). John Nkomo, the Speaker of the Parliament between 2005 and 2008, echoed Mugabe's line of thought. Reacting to the proposed Gukurahundi Memorial Bill that sought to criminalise the denial of the massacre, the Speaker asked his colleagues to be careful in handling such emotive issues. He said that the Gukurahundi Memorial Bill would affect 'the national unity symbolised by the unification of ZANU and ZAPU into the united ZANU-PF' (Mpofu 2016, 158). This is because the Gukurahundi is 'steeped in tribal overtones pitting the Ndebeles against the Shona and no one wants to revisit such a divisive era' (Mpofu 2016, 158). Despite the government's disingenuous efforts to sacrifice justice for the Gukurahundi victims for the sake of nation building, participants in Murambadoro's ethnographic research responded that 'the residual hatred in Matabeleland cannot be cured unless there are deep regret, acknowledgement, and apology from the perpetrators of the violence' (2015, 52).

The Zimbabwean government sees the MDC (the opposition party) and its supporters who pressure the government to apologise for the Matabeleland massacre and other human rights violations as divisive elements sponsored by the West. Saviour Kasukuwere, who served as the Minister for Local Government, Public Works, and National Housing in Mugabe's cabinet before the 2017 coup, derided the MDC as 'traitors and saboteurs whose mission is to assist the imperialist agenda of Britain and their American allies' (Mararike 2018, 206). Progressive domestic voices demanding an apology are characterised as 'British neo-colonial machinations' and 'local agents of the Western imperialist' (Mugabe 2001, 40). Labelling the opposition as a 'front for imperialism' helps to alienate the MDC from both its potential and

its real supporters who are sensitive to issues of colonial injustice and postcolonial redress. Given that ZANU-PF derives much of its comradeship from the liberation struggle, an assault on ZANU-PF is deemed 'an assault on the very values of the Liberation Struggle' (Mugabe 2001, 119).

The Matabeleland massacre received renewed attention following the ousting of Mugabe from power on 19 November 2017. In the post-Mugabe era, the world has been interested in what President Mnangagwa will do regarding the atrocities. Unlike Mugabe, President Mnangagwa said in an interview with the national broadcaster ZBC that there is nothing wrong with debating and speaking about the Gukurahundi on television and in newspapers (Mavhunga 2019). On 5 January 2018, President Emmerson Mnangagwa signed the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission Bill (NPRC) into law to enable the Commission, instituted in 2016, to begin its work of ensuring post-conflict justice, healing and reconciliation in Zimbabwe. This gesture allegedly conveyed his administration's seriousness about dealing with the Matabeleland massacre. Despite these measures, President Mnangagwa has refused to apologise outright for the Gukurahundi operation.

The divisive narrative is not only peculiar to Mugabe's government. President Mnangagwa's ZANU-PF government also mobilises the same narrative to discredit the opposition. Christopher Mutsuvangwa, a senior Mnangagwa advisor, is quoted as saying that 'bringing up the past is simply unhelpful, irresponsible, and diversionary. Zimbabwe needs a break' (quoted in Simmons 2017). Similarly, in his article in the state-owned *Herald* newspaper, Stephen Mpofu claims that the renewed agitation for compensation for Gukurahundi victims in the new dispensation by 'Gukurahundi Purveyors' is 'strenuously casting a small dark cloud to discolour the armed revolution that brought Uhuru to the motherland in 1980' (Mpofu 2018). It is important to admit that while the ZANU-PF and government officials are critical of revisiting the past when demands are being made for apology, they are also quick to mobilise, invoke and reconstruct the past for contemporary political exigencies, especially the liberation struggle. They have constructed a 'patriotic history' around the liberation struggle, which they constantly mobilise as a faux 'pan-African redemptive ideology opposed to all forms of imperialism and colonialism and dedicated to a radical redistributive project predicated in redress of colonial injustice' (Compagnon 2011, 3). If the past is partially invoked when it favours ZANU-PF, it shows serious inconsistencies in the way they use and manipulate the past and memory.

As has been argued by some scholars critical of the Zimbabwean government, the appropriation of anti-colonial, anti-Western and Pan-Africanism narratives by successive ZANU-PF-led governments are undeniably smokescreens for the party's 'policy shortcomings, authoritarianism and elite accumulation project' (Muzondidya 2010, 12). By situating the Matabeleland massacre within the discourse of postcolonial redress and the protection of the gains of liberation, the ZANU-PF-led governments have managed to attract some sympathy across the political divide. Notwithstanding the cynical and rhetorical nature of their statements, they seem to resonate with older generations and War veterans with fresh memories of colonialism. The strategic framing of the denial of apology as an integral part of postcolonial resistance has provided the ZANU-PF's government the platform to connect with this section of the population who are perturbed by the possible attrition of their liberation gain by the West. However, this does not suggest that all war veterans agree with the ZANU-PF government's disingenuous framing, mobilisation and utilisation of the liberation war credentials. There is discord and acrimony between the government and some

veterans. Disgruntled Liberation War veterans have over the years accused the ZANU-PF of valorising them during election periods for political purposes, only to discard them shortly after. Chairperson of the War Veteran's Welfare Pressure Group Amon Siguake has apologised on 'behalf of the generality of war veterans for the trauma inflicted on the people during past election in their name' (quoted in Matenga 2021).

In 2010, the Zimbabwean government arrested and detained Owen Maseko for portraying the massacre of the Ndebele people during the Gukurahundi operation through his work titled *Sibathontisele* at the National Gallery in Bulawayo. Maseko was charged by the government for 'inciting violence, undermining Mr. Mugabe's name and demeaning Mr. Mugabe's tribe, the Shonas' (Pswarayi 2012). In a similar vein, the hard-hitting play of Cot Mhlanga titled *The Good President* was banned by the Zimbabwean government for critiquing President Mugabe's rule and high-handed approach to oppositional citizens during the Gukurahundi (Bulawayo 2018). While coloniality of knowledge is originally theorised within the West–non-West historical dichotomy, there are obvious traces or manifestations of such a phenomenon in the Zimbabwean government response to the demand for national apology for the Gukurahundi massacre. The Zimbabwean government has consistently used different state apparatus to distort, erase and suppress discussion of the Gukurahundi Massacre. These denial gestures aimed at suppressing public acknowledgement of mass injuries exacerbate the feeling of victimhood.

Ontological insecurity and the Gukurahundi victims

The quest for ontological security tends to affirm 'identity along axes of self and other in ways which achieve ontological security at the expense of those others' (Rossdale 2015, 373). Kinnvall argues that 'increasing ontological security for one person or group by means of nationalist or religious myths is thus likely to decrease ontological security for those not included in the nationalist and religious discourse' (Kinnvall 2004, 763). In other words, the quest for ontological security-seeking is a contested process. Sometimes, the narratives, policies and rhetoric utilised to resolve the threat to a state's ontological security may serve to increase the ontological insecurity of one of the identities. The ontological security framework is analytically productive when applied at the local (individual) level. It helps to unpack ways the persistent refusal of apology and sustained effort to suppress knowledge, truth and memory of the Gukurahundi by the Zimbabwean government produces ontological insecurity issues for the families and communities affected by the massacre. The ontological insecurity issues manifested in the lives of the surviving victims, families and communities include the inability to exhume and rebury their dead relatives and the lack of proper documentation. It is logical to argue that the continual demand for a national apology, truth-telling, commemoration, exhumation and reburial are ontological security-seeking actions at the grassroots level for people whose lives have been violently disoriented.

During the massacre, most victims were buried in shallow, mass graves (Eppel 2006). And since the end of the Gukurahundi massacre, the Zimbabwean government has made a sustained effort to deny the families of the deceased the opportunity to properly bury and mourn their relatives. In 2012, the police in Matobo refused to clear the reburial ceremony of one of the Gukurahundi victims, saying that they had not been given an order to 'deal with Gukurahundi issues' (Bulawayo 2012). The communities and families are left without possession of the remains of their loved ones because these shallow and mass graves have

not been exhumed (Eppel 2006). It is a moral and cultural obligation for communities and families to bury their dead relatives. Proper burial performs dual functions: it signifies respect for human life and dignity and constitutes a rite of passage that allows the spirit of the deceased to reconnect with the ancestral family. The absence of proper burial threatens this ancestral reconnection, which, in turn, affects the self-image of the communities and families. The failure to provide proper burials thereby compounds the families' wounds (Ndlovu 2021).

The government's refusal to acknowledge the Gukurahundi massacre and their effort to censor knowledge production make it difficult for families of the deceased victims to obtain death certificates for their relatives. The absence of death certificates, in turn, creates problems for the surviving children in obtaining birth certificates and creates difficulties for the surviving partners or family to access savings or pensions of the deceased. Equally, some children find it difficult to acquire identity documents because one or both parents were killed and there is no death certificate to prove the family connection. Consequently, these people are unable to access their rights as citizens of Zimbabwe. The children of rape victims are repeatedly stigmatised because their presence constantly evokes the memory of suffering. The massacre left many families without breadwinners, which compromised their future, and those who suffered severe physical injuries and cannot work have to depend on the goodwill of family and neighbours (CCJP and LRF 2007, 142–143).

Ontological security-seeking at the state level tends to enable 'discourse that reproduces hierarchies and contribute[s] to the continuation of the exclusionary practice' (Çapan and Zarakol 2017, 205). At the state level, the Zimbabwean government's ontological security-seeking ignores the agency and identity of actual victims. Instead of transforming them, it alienates and co-opts their voices, leaving them more vulnerable. Therefore, the families and the community, through their continuous demand for national apology, exhumation, reburial and proper documentation, are exercising their agency to take control of the narrative and memory of the Gukurahundi massacre. It is this re-establishment of agency that is aimed at securing their sense of self. While the Zimbabwean government sees their faux anti-imperialism rhetoric that cumulates in the denial of the Gukurahundi massacre as its preferred way of securing its ontological security, the surviving victims, families of dead victims and wider society see their demand for apology, and the offering of that apology by the Zimbabwe government, as part of their quest to reassert their own ontological security. Instead of providing a greater sense of ontological certainty and security for its citizens through its own pursuit of ontological security, the Zimbabwean government's quest for ontological security generates ontological insecurity for its citizens. In that regard, this article joins the growing body of critical and postcolonial works on ontological security that advocate for the decentralisation and reimagining of the 'Self' of ontological security (see Rossdale 2015, Untalan 2020).

Conclusion

There is an apparent appropriation of postcolonial discourse by the Zimbabwean government to 'develop an imaginary politics in which manipulation of the rhetoric of autonomy, resistance and emancipation serve as the sole criterion for political legitimacy' (Mbembe 2002, 240–241). On the one hand, the appropriation of postcolonial rhetoric allows the Zimbabwean government to construct a self-identity as deriving from a heroic and courageous struggle against external forces and their alleged domestic allies. On the other hand,

it perpetuates colonial-like power structures and hierarchies. As the case study demonstrates, the postcolonial resistance of the Zimbabwean government is not innately progressive but may become entangled in reproducing exclusionary politics within the domestic sphere.

The well-rehearsed anti-Western, anti-imperialism, and faux Pan-Africanism are used as tools to switch the focus from righting the wrongs of the past to one that emphasises the supposed imperialist objectives of the West. They are deployed to evade taking responsibility for complicity in human rights violations. This self-serving evocation of the rhetoric of resistance also has a colonial dimension and a silencing effect. It discursively and structurally excludes the victims of the Gukurahundi massacre from expressing their experiences or seeking recognition of the wrongs, thereby creating ontological insecurity for the victims. The co-optation sets up a hierarchical power structure whereby certain people within the postcolonial states are yet again denied a voice.

The repeated demands for national apology, reburial, commemoration and proper documentation by the surviving victims and families of the deceased are ontological security-seeking actions aimed at protecting their memories and identity. These demands also threaten the hegemonic narratives of a government that is determined to suppress the memory of the Gukurahundi massacre. Both parties are trapped in an ongoing inter-subjective relationship in their struggle for an established sense of self.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Osondu C. Ugochukwu obtained his undergraduate degree in philosophy from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 2010. He proceeded thereafter to pursue his MSc and PhD in Politics and International Relations from the University of Aberdeen in the United Kingdom. His doctorate thesis is on *Ontological Security, Resistance and State Apologies: Zimbabwe and Turkey*. He is originally from Nigeria and his research interests are in international relations, political apologies, socio-political philosophy, African philosophy, peace and conflict resolution, post-conflict reconciliation, and Global South politics.

Notes

1. For a broad analysis of political apologies across the world, see Schaafsma and Zoodsma (2021).
2. The Zimbabwe War of Independence was fought between two nationalist liberation forces and the Rhodesian force. The Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) was the military wing of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), while the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) was the military wing of the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU).

3. In 1983, Robert Mugabe set up the Chihambakwe Commission of Inquiry to investigate the al-leged massacre of the Ndebele people, but the findings were never made public. On 22 December 1987, Robert Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo signed the Unity Accord. In 1988, Robert Mugabe's government also issued Clemency Order Number 1, pardoning all people (state security forces and dissidents) involved in human rights violations committed between 1982 and 1987.
4. See, among others, CCJP and LRF (1999), Mashingaidze (2005), Rwafa (2012), Killander and Nyathi (2015), Murambadoro (2015), Ngwenya and Harris (2015), Ncube and Siziba (2017) and Tarusarira (2019).
5. See, among others, Wendt (2004), Neumann (2004) and Jackson (2004a).

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