

## Participation, citizen journalism and the contestations of identity and national symbols: A case of Zimbabwe's national heroes and the Heroes' Acre

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### Abstract

This article constitutes an examination on how citizen journalism has challenged Robert Mugabe's authoritarian regime on issues pertaining to national heroes and usages of the Heroes Acre as central national identity markers. Under Mugabe's ZANU-PF, Zimbabwe has seen the public being limited from directly participating in salient national debates. ZANU-PF's control of the official public sphere has also constrained alternative views from ventilating the government-controlled communicative spaces. The party's narrative on heroes, the Heroes Acre and national identity has gained a taken-for-granted status in the public media. This has obtained against the backdrop of what has become known as the Zimbabwe crises, characterised by a declining economy, a constricted political space, a breakdown in the rule of law, and the subsequent flight of a number of Zimbabweans into the diaspora. The accompanying wave of technological advancements and the mushrooming of mostly diaspora-based online media have opened up new vistas of communication, enabling a hitherto 'silenced' community of ordinary people to participate in national conversations. The conclusion reached here, is that citizen journalism has not only enhanced the culture of conversation among people (as espoused under democratic conditions) but has also covered up the democratic deficit experienced in the public sphere, mediated by traditional media, parliament and pavement radio.

**Keywords:** alternative public spheres; citizen journalism; ; Heroes' Acre; national identity; new media; participation

### INTRODUCTION

Since the Zimbabwe 'crisis'<sup>1</sup> (Masunungure 2006; Mlambo and Raftopoulos 2010; Muzondidya 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009; Raftopoulos 2006) in the early 2000s the Zimbabwe Heroes' Acre, and the selection and burial of heroes have become potent, controversial and contested terrains in Zimbabwe's contentious nation-making project. Besides myths, monuments such as heroes' acres and national heroes are amongst the most important nation-making symbols to have featured in the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front's (ZANU-PF) post-colonial national bonding narrative, particularly post-2000. Successive ZANU-PF governments have controlled national identity narratives in the public media since 1980. The year 2000 marked a dip in ZANU-PFs' popularity in Zimbabwe, characterised by declining support; the formation of a formidable opposition party (the Movement for Democratic Change [MDC] that performed better than expected in the parliamentary elections of that year, disrupting ZANU-PF's hegemony for the first time since the 1987 Unity Accord [Mpofu 2014a]; a slump in the economy; rising unemployment levels and dwindling opportunities for a better life. These factors were compounded by the exodus of a considerable number of (especially) skilled and educated Zimbabweans into the diaspora. With passing time and ZANU-PF's dictatorial tendencies wearing off its liberation war-inspired legitimacy, ZANU-PF has used the Heroes' Acre and dead heroes to 're-freeze' its ideologies, both in space and time (Osborne 1998) so as to preserve this legitimacy. Among other things, ZANU-PF utilises cultural forms of nationalism which include celebrating heroes through music galas (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems 2009; Willems 2013), documentaries or feature articles in state-controlled media, patriotic history (Ranger 2004) and national holiday celebrations (Mpofu 2015; Willems 2013).

In a context where the ruling party and government of the day are conflated, the Heroes' Acre has been used as an exclusively ZANU-PF inner members' private burial shrine, rendering it a contaminated space and site of national identity conflict and contest. Osborne (2001, n.p.) argues that in such a case national mythologies, symbols and shrines 'are manipulated to encourage identification with the state and reinforce its continuity and ubiquity'. Shrines (especially in postcolonial settings) are important as they freeze the past which becomes meaningful and activated 'by the contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere (Mpofu 2014a) the argument is made that the Zimbabwe crisis is multilayered, complex and cannot be said to have begun in the early 2000s. Zimbabwe has always gone through moments of crisis, the major instance perhaps being the 1963 break-up of the nationalist movement.

desires of individuals and communities, and, most powerfully, by the will of the nations' (Osborne 2004, xvii). They act as spaces for ceremonies, mourning and therapy, thus seemingly harmonising and forming an association with certain ideologies (Kalipeni and Zeleza 1999). The Heroes' Acre is meant to symbolise the painful route followed in birthing the Zimbabwean nation. It also stands as a reminder of where the nation is going, in so far as the decolonisation project is concerned. However, as this article demonstrates, the shrine stands corrupted, contested and condemned.

This article suggests that Web 2.0 has created an architecture of participation (O'Reilly 2005). Here, we examine how citizen journalism challenges Zimbabwe's authoritarian regime on issues pertaining to national hero selection and the usages of the Heroes' Acre as a central national identity marker from 2000–2015. This period is key in Zimbabwean politics, as the 'crisis' in the country had global relevance. ZANU-PF has advanced a hitherto dominant narrative on heroes, the Heroes' Acre and national identity, and these discourses have gained currency, domination and taken-for-granted status over time – especially in the public media. Since the signing of the Unity Accord in 1987, burials and the Heroes' Acre were not as intensely contested as is currently the case. This can largely be attributed to the deregulation of the economy (and the media space) in the 1990s, and the advent of new media technologies as alternative communicative fora for the ostracised and excluded majority.

## THE CASE, METHOD AND FOCUS

The wave of technology that swept through the country's communicative space from the 2000s has altered ZANU-PF's dominance on salient national debates. This study relies on a diasporic online news site and citizen journalism to analyse the ordinary everyday citizens' attitudes and opinions on government's treatment of debates on Zimbabwe's national heroes and its Heroes' Acre. For the purposes of this research, only the stories and citizen journalism activities from a case study – are used, namely the online site [Newzimbabwe.com](http://Newzimbabwe.com). This does not in any way suggest that it is the only site available to Zimbabweans, but suffice to say that this is one of the leading online news platforms in Zimbabwe. It is probably the oldest and was the first to introduce citizen journalism, allowing users to debate issues without much gatekeeping. In addition, users could contribute to certain stories. Therefore, studying this website (which was soon emulated

post-2003) provides some insight into how citizens appropriate new media as tools which enable them to confront the status quo. Newzimbabwe.com is owned by a Wales-based company, New Zimbabwe Limited. The current editor of the government-controlled *Chronicle* newspaper, Mduduzi Mathuthu, who previously compiled the letters to the editor in this newspaper and worked as a journalist at *Daily News*, is the founding editor of Newzimbabwe.com. Mathuthu sold his shares to Jeff Madzingo in 2013 before joining *The Chronicle*. The company describes itself as follows: 'We boast the finest correspondents and columnists you can assemble in Zimbabwe and abroad. The constant flow of brilliantly presented ideas and strong argument has brought us plaudits, while those who hate our cause inevitably frown upon us' (Newzimbabwe.com 2003). The news site is funded through advertising and boasts professional layouts, with categories such as: 'News, Business, Showbiz, Sports, Opinion, Local, Diaspora, Religion and Blogs' (ibid.) – all of which allow space for citizen engagement.

The main agenda of this article is to analyse how citizen journalism has 'liberated' the discourse of nation-formation from ZANU-PF control, while affording ordinary Zimbabweans an opportunity to exercise agency by giving them a voice on national debates. To do this, of course the dominant narratives of ZANU-PF and the public media on issues related to the Heroes' Acre and national heroes need to be intimated, even though this constitutes a separate study altogether. Citizen journalism, according to Luke Goode (2009: 1289) refers to 'a range of web-based practices whereby "ordinary" users engage in journalistic practices ... such as current affairs based blogging, photo and video sharing, and posting eyewitness commentary on current events' and commenting on stories. Methodologically, this researcher used the website's search bars to enter keywords like 'Heroes' Acre', 'heroes' and 'heroes' burial'. Stories related to these keywords were conveniently selected and read. Next, stories and comments considered useful for this article, were subjectively selected. The selected postings largely railed against the status quo. As a result, the study grapples with the following questions: What are the meanings of ZANU-PF's constructions and imaginations of the Heroes' Acre, heroes and national identity, and how are these received by online audiences? How have new media technologies altered the way people engage on national identity, with a special focus on heroes and the Heroes' Acre?

To answer these questions, this study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) to engage with citizen journalists' debates in an in-depth fashion. CDA is used to study 'the

way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context' (Van Dijk 2001, 352). The role of CDA is therefore to 'take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality' (ibid.). This research takes the position that ZANU-PF has narrowed down and even excluded the citizenry from participating in national debates, which has led to online media debates railing against the ruling party. This research concludes that citizen journalism has given ordinary people a platform to challenge the dominant narratives of autocratic regimes via secure and safe online avenues. Further, citizen journalism has not only enhanced the culture of conversation among people, as espoused under democratic theory (Carpentier and Dahlgren 2013; Mouffe 2000), but has also covered up the democratic deficit experienced in authoritarian countries. This research occupies a special place in the growing Zimbabwean literature on monuments and identity (Fisher 2010; Mpofu 2014a; 2016); cultural nation-making processes using national monuments, holidays and heroes (Kriger 1995; Mpofu 2015b; Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems 2009; Willems 2013) and the role of new media in affording ordinary people a voice and creating alternative platforms for discourse on national identity issues (Mano and Willems 2008; L. Moyo 2009; Mpofu 2014a; Peel 2009).

#### CITIZEN JOURNALISM AS ALTERNATIVE PUBLIC SPHERE

Part of Mugabe's totalitarian legacy in post-2000 Zimbabwe is the contributions he inadvertently made to the growth of new media – especially online news sites. Thus, as the socio-political and economic chaos which ZANU-PF has ushered Zimbabwe into gained momentum in the 2000s, a large number of people fled the country as political and economic refugees. Among these were journalists and activists who started and participated in online publications and debates from the diaspora (e.g., in 2000 alone the intolerant ZANU-PF government arrested 20 local journalists and deported three foreign correspondents from the country). These media are also accessible in the homeland, even though there are challenges related to affordability of software and hardware, technological know-how and connectivity in a highly informalised economy like Zimbabwe. Diasporic online media, together with what Ellis (1989) calls '*radio trottoir*' [pavement radio], continue to challenge government-sponsored dominant discourses in the local official media. In the process, this ventilates the public sphere with alternative

or yet to be officially confirmed/denied information. Diaspora, in this article, is used in accordance with the definitions proffered by Walter Connor (1994), Judith Shuval (2000), William Safran (1991) and Martin Baumann (2000), to refer to a segment of people living outside their homeland (Zimbabwe in this case) while maintaining interests in it from their new homes (bases) in the diaspora. Shuval (2000, 41) clarifies that the diaspora live and act in 'host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin – their homelands'. The Zimbabwean diaspora's definition (because of the way some of them left the homeland) has 'emotion-laden connotations of uprootedness, precariousness and homesickness provid[ing] explanations for the group's enduring and nostalgic loyalty to ... the country of origin' (ibid, 314).

While journalism has hitherto been viewed as a lecture, online news media have upset this 'status quo' and introduced citizen journalism, which has shown that journalism can be a conversation as well where audiences interact both with journalists and amongst themselves (Marchionni 2013; Mpofu 2014a and b). The diasporic online media have entered into a polarised mediascape as alternative media (Atton 2002; Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier 2008; Mpofu 2014a and b) to the public media, whose political economy means they have to support ZANU-PF. This expansion has enriched the constrained Zimbabwean public sphere. According to Atton (2002) and Bailey et al. (2008), alternative media are organised and operate differently from mainstream media, especially where financing, the distribution of media products and the management of organisations and their relationship with the status quo are concerned. Alternative media are usually conceptualised as playing a counter-hegemonic role in society, in railing against the dominant discourses advanced by the ruling elite. This function bears a semblance to 'letters to the editor' in traditional media. Citizen journalism has given life, agency and character to those audiences that previously existed in traditional journalists' imagination.

The contributions of diasporic online media to the Zimbabwean public sphere are simple to account, yet profound. Those members in the news consumption chain (previously called 'consumers') are now both consumers and producers, as online media allow them to gather, process and distribute material by writing blogs attached to news sites, posting videos and photographs, or commenting under 'stories'. Another revolutionary characteristic of online media is the empowerment of dispossessed, ostracised and excluded citizens by giving them a voice (Mitra 2001, 2004) which allows

them to challenge those in power. This becomes a unique forum for expression that is not accessible in the print and broadcast media controlled by ZANU-PF in Zimbabwe. Recently, almost all Zimbabwean newspapers – private and public – went online, making provision for reader commentary on stories. However, comments that rail against the status quo do not make it into the hard copy newspapers that are sold on the streets and supermarkets, since only a limited number of positive comments and SMSs are chosen. The use of diasporic online media is informed by an established trend of most of these media being anti-status quo, operating outside local media laws and relying on online advertising/funding from their founders – a political economy vastly different from publicly owned media. Reader participation or citizen journalism gives some stories credibility, especially when confirmed by citizens who are in proximity to an event or experienced it first-hand (Gulyas 2013). In the absence of official communication – especially during election time – citizen journalists ‘trade’ in and with information in parallel communicative spaces (see Moyo’s [2009] study of Zimbabwe’s 2008 elections).

While scholars like Pavlic (2000) suggest that citizen journalism has created a two-way street of communication between journalists and the public, evidence from my research in Zimbabwe points to the fact that journalists, after publishing stories online, remain silent and allow readers to debate. This does not, however, suggest that journalists do not read the comments: in some cases, readers point out inaccuracies in stories, which are later corrected by the journalists. Tied to this notion is the fact that citizen journalists can now monitor traditional media and journalists, thus assuming the role of the Fifth Estate by watching over the watchdogs (Mabweazara 2014; Milioni, Konstantinos and Venetia 2012).

Moreover, scholars such as McElroy (cited in Mabweazara 2014) ‘raise concerns’ about the authenticity of online material written under pseudonyms. It is important to point out that in countries where state security agents monitor people’s private communications, it is imperative that citizen journalists be cautious and not risk their own security or that of their families. Besides the negative aspects of participatory journalism (e.g., an avalanche of uncontrolled comments or flaming [lack of civility and use of vulgar language]), new media have revolutionised and expanded the options citizens have to subvert and undermine authoritarian regimes through discourse (Bernal 2004, 2005; Mano and Willems 2008; Mpofu 2014a, 2015a; Parham 2004).

The practice of citizen journalism is not without challenges, especially for citizen journalists inside Zimbabwe. With the economy performing poorly and most employed people having been reduced to vending second-hand clothing, fruit and vegetables or telephone recharge card, bread-and-butter issues tend to be more important than informational needs. While citizen journalism has dismantled gatekeeping and other ethics-enhancing codes used by traditional media to protect audiences, this has left audiences exposed to unethical journalistic practices which infringe on people's security and privacy. Be that as it may, this article will demonstrate how citizen journalism has been instrumental in contesting ZANU-PF's dominant ideologies and affording ordinary people an opportunity to discursively construct alternative meanings of, amongst others, the Heroes' Acre, heroes and national identity. The internet as a safe and alternative platform allows for expressions that would not usually see the light of day, particularly not in the public media.<sup>a</sup>

### **The Heroes' Acre and definitions of heroes**

The Ministry of Information (1989, 3) imagines a shrine as a place of pilgrimage for the masses intent on creating their own history, designed to 'arouse national consciousness, forge national unity and identity ... the pride of the people of Zimbabwe. A symbol of bravery and selflessness of those whose remains are laid to rest there.' On its website, the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (n.d.) advertises and describes the Heroes' Acre thus:

... a burial ground and national monument ... Its stated purpose is to commemorate Patriotic Front guerrillas killed during the Rhodesian Bush War, and contemporary Zimbabweans whose dedication or commitment to their country justify their interment at the shrine.

These two definitions limit themselves to the liberation war, but bring out an important aspect of nationhood, dedication and sacrifice, and attempt to legitimate a certain group's contribution to (and, to a certain extent, dominance of) the nation. For Savage (1994, 130), monuments and the commemoration of the war dead anchor and legitimate 'the very notion of collective memory' as key to national identity formation. In Zimbabwe, this is at the expense of gender, democracy, diversity and inclusivity.



The Heroes' Acre hosts the remains of undistinguished guerillas who only participated in the violent Third Chimurenga, people such as Cain Nkala, Chenjerai Hunzvi and Border Gezi, ZANU-PF members and Mugabe loyalists with questionable liberation-war credentials. This makes ZANU-PF's criteria for national hero conferment as peculiar as it is controversial. Clearly, the principles according to which someone may be declared a national hero are not those that the war of independence was fought for. Practising the right to belong or form a political party alternative to ZANU-PF nullifies an individual's status as a national hero, along with his/her contribution to the country's nationhood. When Mugabe's cousin James Chikerema (one of the founding fathers of the country's liberation struggle) died, Mugabe insisted on burying him 'KwaZvimba' (in Mugabe's rural home), as Chikerema had 'betrayed his comrades when he joined up with Bishop Abel Muzorewa and Ian Smith as part of the internal settlement ... [and ignoring party policy of] consistency and persistence... [which are] key to our definition of national hero' (Newzimbabwe.com, September 18, 2010).

In addition, when Thenjiwe Lesabe (a PF-ZAPU founding member and later a minister and member of ZANU-PF post the 1987 Unity Accord) died in 2011, she was also denied national heroine status. The Unity Accord was a compromise peace deal meant to end further bloodshed through a genocide in Zimbabwe's south-western regions, where 20 000 Ndebele-speaking people, perceived to be PF-ZAPU supporters, were killed (Mpofu 2015b). Lesabe had the credentials of a national heroine, having fought in the country's liberation war and later served as a minister. According to Amos Ngwenya, in an opinion article in Newzimbabwe.com (February 14, 2011), Lesabe's crime was that she 'decided to go back to her roots to re-join the revived ZAPU and was elected chairperson of the ZAPU Council of Elders at the party's 9<sup>th</sup> congress held in Bulawayo in 2010'.

According to ZANU-PF's then Secretary for Administration, Didymus Mutasa, this act obliterated Lesabe's chances of being conferred heroine status. Mutasa is quoted by Sithole in an opinion article in Newzimbabwe.com as saying:

We could not confer to her a national heroine status, which was her rightful status, because she was not consistent when she joined ZAPU led by Dabengwa. ... ZAPU members are still part and parcel of ZANU-PF because of the agreement that we signed and nobody should go against that agreement. (Sithole, 15 February 2011)

However, this did not apply to Edgar Tekere, who was declared a national hero despite his friction with Mugabe. His history is captured thus:

Tekere ticks most boxes on the criteria used by Zanu-PF to pick national heroes, helped in no small measure by his liberation war credentials, but his post-independence dalliance with opposition politics could be seen as falling short of a standard ... that heroes must have 'pursued and promoted the ideals of the liberation struggle consistently and persistently, without deviating from the same, right through to the bitter end'. (Newzimbabwe.com, June 9, 2011)

Clearly the principles on which someone is declared a national hero are not those that the war of independence was fought for. According to some online debates, the Tekere issue brings in an ethnic dimension (explored later in the article). Other 'heroes' buried at the Heroes' Acre, who had no post-war connection with ZANU-PF, include the former Commercial Farmers' Union leader Gary Magadzire and Joseph Culverwell. There is scant scholarship on these issues, but it is sufficient to suggest that this highlights the problematic nature of ZANU-PF's determination of heroes.

### **Citizen journalism: Contesting Heroes' Acre and heroes**

Narratives on the selection of heroes and on the Heroes' Acre as a national space in online media and citizen journalists' postings, explore issues which are rarely raised in public media. These include the problematics of defining a hero, issues of ethnicity and the need for the shrine to be inclusive. These alternative voices attempt to upset ZANU-PF's dominant discourses. While the ruling party has forcefully harnessed colonial memory which tends to expediently privilege its position as a nationalist party for the purpose of nation building and identity construction, debates in online media rail against this (ab)use of colonial memory, patriotic history and journalism (Kriger 2006; Phimister 2012; Ranger 2004; Tendi 2008). For example, in a challenge to ZANU-PF's dominance and control over the Heroes' Acre and liberation memory, Newzimbabwe.com blogger, Chofamba Sithole (February 15, 2011), argues that the construction and definition of heroes can be made by Zimbabweans 'apart from ZANU-PF pronouncements'.

### Citizens' definition of a hero

The discussion that follows concerns contestations around the meanings attributed to the national Heroes' Acre as a nation-making space, and offers alternative definitions of who/what a hero is. These debates occur in a context where ZANU-PF has denied some 'heroes' burial at the national shrine, while others reject, outright, burial at the shrine even prior to their death. One of the foremost arguments regarding national heroes in online discourses is the need to come up with a satisfactory, operative definition. The MDC finds the current system of hero selection as 'nonsensical [as] ZANU-PF monopoly [carried out by a] group of forsaken men and women ... [who] call themselves the ZANU-PF politburo' (Newzimbabwe.com, March 8, 2011). Zimbabweans have reacted to ZANU-PF's monopolisation of the national shrine by arguing that the people need to define what a hero is, rather than waiting for ZANU-PF to decide:

Most profoundly, many Zimbabweans have now come to recognise heroism apart from ZANU-PF pronouncements, and whatever Mugabe and his Politburo say of those with whom they do not agree politically, if people see them as heroes, then heroes they will forever be. (Sithole, NewZimbabwe.com, February 15, 2011)

Tsitsi Maguvaz's remarks advocate for an inclusive and fair system of hero selection under the same blog:

What qualifies a hero in Zimbabwe? Is there some kind of criteria or a panel that decides this? If not there is a need for one or let the people decide. A hero is definitely to the country and not to the politicians. Let us not all get tangled up in politics and give the respect to our heroes. I do not think it is fair for someone to deem a hero based merely on their personal, emotional opinion or affiliation.

The proposition by the opposition MDC-T, for instance, is to assemble

an all-stakeholders' body with no single subjective interest in the conferment of such national status on any individual ... an inclusive national policy with set parameters and clearly defined yardsticks [to determine who qualifies to be a national hero] ... not only politicians qualify to be national heroes [as] Zimbabweans have produced the best minds

in business, in sport, in music and in the arts in general and these people must be recognised as nation builders. (MDC Press Statement 2009)

The suggestion is that ZANU-PF needs to change the criteria for conferring hero status, because observations by politicians and academics suggest that the party uses the shrine to selectively reward Mugabe loyalists, not necessarily national loyalists (Mpofu 2014a). This contestation emphasises that the process needs to be all-inclusive and should encompass different fields of achievement.

In a story 'Zanu-PF says Gamatoto Midzi deserves no honour', [Newzimbabwe.com](http://Newzimbabwe.com) (June 11, 2015) reports on the death of ZANU-PF's suspended member Amos Midzi, who was denied hero status by the party. Midzi's former allies, who were sacked from ZANU-PF, include Didymus Mutasa, Rugare Gumbo and then Vice-President Joice Mujuru, among others. Mutasa's tone changed from his famous support for the privatisation of the shrine by ZANU-PF, arguing that people have to be accorded heroes' status for what they contributed to Zimbabwe and ZANU-PF, not for daring to challenge Mugabe.

Umuntu comments on the story, pointing out: 'I thought that place was called National Heroes' Acre but now I see I was mistaken. It's Zanu Heroes' Acre.' Another interlocutor, Chuck, responds thus:

Again you are mistaken: it's a Mugabe heroes' acre. Midzi is still Zanu-Pf member but not a Mugabe boot licker. That's why he's no hero! For same reason Mujuru and all her sympathizers will never be heroes. By criticising Mugabe they have lost their rights to be viewed as heroes. That's the way the system they set up always perks and Gumbo should not cry foul. ([Newzimbabwe.com](http://Newzimbabwe.com), June 11, 2015)

This captures public awareness of how ZANU-PF operates in awarding hero status. It also helps to illustrate the perceived security which online media offer users, allowing them to debate issues to the extent of crossing political and cultural boundaries of correctness, e.g., by 'insulting' the president. Brad ([Newzimbabwe.com](http://Newzimbabwe.com), June 16, 2015) summarises most of the comments on the story thus: 'National hero status has lost its lustre ever since ZANU-PF started burying thieves and murderers. We no longer take it seriously.'

Online debates seem to suggest that anyone affiliated to ZANU-PF is a villain. However, apparently leaving ZANU-PF also makes one a hero in the eyes of ordinary people. Mastadon compares Midzi (a member of ZANU-PF) to Mujuru, Gumbo and Mutasa:

The guy had so much blood on his hands. He did not repent, so I hope he is getting his true Justice from the man upstairs. At least the likes of Mutasa and Mujuru have repented and said sorry for their transgressions. We have to see if they live up to their new image. (Newzimbabwe.com, June 16, 2015)

The above suggests that like identity, hero status is not fixed but changes according to circumstances. More than three decades post-independence, ordinary people's definition of a hero seems to be mutating: from referring to those who fought in the war, to those who are fighting the postcolonial injustices perpetrated by ZANU-PF. In essence, online public deliberations attempt to salvage the national memory and narrative from being 'owned' by ZANU-PF – a party that dominates the grand narrative of the liberation struggle – and open up possibilities of participation on the part of ordinary citizens.

#### Contesting and rebuffing the notion of the Heroes' Acre

ZANU-PF has 'Zanu-nised' the shrine and institution of Zimbabwean heroes. Mugabe is quoted by Newzimbabwe.com (March 26, 2011) as contending that the Heroes' Acre belongs to ZANU-PF and 'only members of... ZANU-PF ... will be buried at the national Heroes' Acre in Harare ... those unhappy with the development were free to establish separate shrines for their own heroes'. This, to a certain extent, has made the shrine fail to arouse national pride, belonging and consciousness, as it has become a contested site of shame where crooks, thieves and violent Mugabe loyalists are buried. Ultimately, it has failed to foster the national unity and collective national identity for which it was intended. The use of this space has been contested since the 1980s, first by PF-ZAPU (the main opposition until after the Unity Accord), then later in the post-2000s by the MDC, human rights NGOs and critical public intellectuals:

Heroes' Acre ... is now a true reflection not of the history of our liberation, but of the betrayal of our Independence ... it has become a place where those true heroes are forced to witness the destruction of what they struggled to achieve. ZANU-PF has appropriated Heroes' Acre, turning it into a cemetery for the human instruments of murder and

corruption and oppression through which they have stolen Zimbabwe from the Zimbabwean people. (Sokwanele, November 21, 2004)

The Heroes' Acre is not only a contested space: some heroes and their families have rejected the 'honour' of having their remains interred at the site, branding it a space for crooks and thieves with whom they would not want to be associated. While 'insiders' to the country's liberation war and nation-making process have rejected the 'honour' of being buried at the shrine, 'outsiders'/opposition parties have clamoured for inclusion, both in terms of identifying heroes and burial at the shrine (particularly during the Government of National Unity [GNU] period, which saw a compromise government between ZANU-PF and the two MDC factions after the inconclusive 2008 elections). In both instances ZANU-PF retained power and largely remained in charge of the Heroes' Acre and hero selection.

The trend is for the opposition (just like PF-ZAPU did) to request from ZANU-PF that one of their party members (or in post-2009 Zimbabwe, a GNU-party member) be declared a national hero. A prominent example is that of Gibson Sibanda, Deputy President of MDC and a GNU cabinet minister. When he died in 2010, both the MDC and MDC-T approached ZANU-PF to have him declared a national hero. Their request speaks to the recognition of the shrine as a national monument central to national identity formation, especially during the GNU when national politics was polarised and prospects of reconciling political and ethnic tensions were thought to be highly likely. Briefly, what qualified Sibanda as a hero according is that he was imprisoned and detained for three years for his role in the liberation struggle and was instrumental in postcolonial opposition politics, including the formation of the GNU in 2008:

He was a critical cog in the liberation struggle ... instrumental in creating the ZCTU ... played a pivotal role in the formation of the power sharing government ... [and] kept true to his principle of 'Zimbabwe first' and if there's anyone who deserves to be called a national hero, then it is him. (Newzimbabwe.com, August 24, 2010)

This assertion contests the limited definition of a hero proffered by ZANU-PF. For the party, Sibanda did not qualify as a hero as he had stood against the liberation movement's principles by forming and belonging to an opposition party. From the quote, heroes are

not only those who belong to ZANU-PF and fought in the liberation war, but also those who continually struggled for the birth of a fair, just and democratic Zimbabwe, even after 1980. In response, Mugabe's spokesman, Charles Charamba, writing under the pseudonym Nathaniel Manheru, argued that the Heroes' Acre is

not a facility for bleaching darkened political souls. It is a site and recognition of honour: honour irrevocably achieved and thus honour which cannot be reversed or undone through subsequent transgressions. ZANU-PF, the sole creator of that Acre ... sole author of rules of entry to that shrine, relies on death for this irrevocability. (Newzimbabwe.com, August 28, 2010)

Thus a 'darkened soul' seems to be anyone who opposes and does not belong to ZANU-PF. Regardless of such a person's contribution to the fight against colonialism or tyranny in postcolonial Zimbabwe, s/he cannot gain entry into the Heroes' Acre, a space ZANU-PF has appropriated as its own.

In his Newzimbabwe.com column entitled 'Cry not for hero status' (August 26, 2010), Alex Magaisa, former Chief of Staff in Tsvangirai's office, makes a critical interjection that seeks to neutralise the Heroes' Acre as a pivotal national monument. He expresses shock that 'the MDC sent the petition at all and secondly, the collective reaction by the two MDCs of shock and disgust at the rejection (of Sibanda). Did they really expect anything positive?' (ibid.). Magaisa further dents the credibility and centrality of the monument to nationhood by arguing that its elitist and privatised nature is exclusionary, sexist and classist:

There are only six women buried at the National Heroes' Acre and all of them except one were spouses of the male political elites. The other one recently buried there was President's sister. Yet it is true that thousands of women played major roles in the liberation struggle. Thousands went to the front and fought alongside their male counterparts. Thousands more have played diverse roles in nation-building since independence. How can it be that only six of them (and those six who are connected to male political elites) were deemed worthy of national hero status? (ibid.)

Magaisa dismantles elitist and partisan constructions of heroism and national identity as insufficient in contributing to the construction of national identity in Zimbabwe. The

institution also acts in favour of men 'as a black, male, political, party biased elitist project' (ibid.) which, when it decides to include white people, are invariably male. To undermine this system, Magaisa suggests devising 'novel ways of honouring citizens', perhaps like ZAPU did before the Unity Accord.

Besides boycotting national heroes' holidays/burials, and openly criticizing ZANU-PF for its 'sectarian process of selecting heroes' (Kriger 1995, 151), PF-ZAPU established the ZIPRA War Shrines Committee whose task was 'to locate the grave sites of ZIPRA freedom fighters, both inside and outside the country ... and marking them with gravestones and building shrines that contain the names of the fallen heroes' (ibid, 154–155). At the burial of Lookout Masuku, Judith Todd (2007, 165) quotes Joshua Nkomo as saying:

But they (ZANU-PF) can't take away his status as a hero. You don't give a man the status of a hero. All you can do is recognise it. It is his. Yes, he can be forgotten temporarily by the state. But the young people who do research will one day unveil what Lookout has done.

Together with opposition parties, Zimbabweans have undermined the ZANU-PF method of identifying and honouring heroes by celebrating these 'heroes' in alternative ways, including through their burial places and in online media, regardless of the ruling party's stance. Such online debates thus form sites of protest, where competing narratives of the nation's alternative to ZANU-PF are produced, circulated and reproduced via online media (Sumartojo 2012). For instance, at the burial of Gibson Sibanda, Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirayi said: '[T]oday we are burying a national hero whose works speak for themselves' (Newzimbabwe.com, August 30, 2010). Similarly, Moyo (2011), writing about Lesabe's burial, argues her heroine status was attested to by the number of people who turned up for the funeral – something which challenges ZANU-PF's definition of a hero. According to Sithole (ibid.), 'if [we] see them those not chosen as heroes by ZANU-PF as heroes, then heroes they will forever be'.

In a Newzimbabwe.com story, Norman Mabhena is quoted as saying the people do not need ZANU-PF to declare anyone a hero. At the funeral of Welshman Mabhena, a former cabinet minister and Governor of Matabeleland South, his brother Norman said:



As a family, we insisted that we would follow the Mabhena rituals in his burial. Mabhena himself was clear about this, he said when he dies he should not be buried in Harare. No person was going to change that. We are in our own right veteran politicians. We don't apologise for that and whether you recognise it or not, that does not change. (Newzimbabwe.com, October 10, 2010)

According to this report, hero status need not be politicised or declared by ZANU-PF for it to carry weight, as a person's life and contribution to the country testify to their heroism. Takura Zhangazha, a blogger on Newzimbabwe.com, reiterates these sentiments: 'Sibanda a hero wherever he is buried':

my firm conviction [is] that Sibanda was a hero well before he died; and that he was not a hero by the narrow definition of ZANU-PF's central committee. That his colleagues wrote a letter to President Mugabe seeking to have him interred at the National Heroes' Acre baffles the mind. This is because that particular resting place of most of the leaders of the liberation struggle has been appropriated by the ZANU-PF cultural and political hegemonic project. To be clearer, the National Heroes' Acre is an institution that serves the political and power narratives of ZANU-PF and not the nation. (Newzimbabwe.com, September 1, 2010)

Thus, the burial space of these three 'heroes', in this instance, does not contribute to their hero status, while their works and the respect shown by ordinary Zimbabweans do. Zhangazha also undermines the national Heroes' Acre as a credible shrine for national consciousness, branding it a tainted. It is a space 'explicitly designed to impart certain elements of the past – and, by definition, to forget others' (Hoelscher and Alderman 2004, 350). This contestation of space and the national identity narrative supports Bhabha's (1990) assertion that national identity narratives must speak to issues of multiplicity, flexibility and hybridity, not rigidity and exclusivity.

By comparison and more problematic is the case of Tekere, whose 'great heroic deeds in his younger days as a youth activist and guerrilla leader fighting to end white rule'. He was awarded hero status, despite inconsistencies that parallel those of Thenjiwe Lesabe. The fact that the latter was denied the honour of being buried in the Heroes' Acre, while the former received this honour, is contentious and speaks to ZANU-PF's inconsistency in honouring heroes.

ZANU-PF's dominant narrative on the Heroes' Acre as the ultimate definer of a hero and symbol of nationhood is challenged by Dinizulu Macaphulana's assertion in an article titled, 'On the heroism of Gibson Sibanda'. He argues that it 'shouldn't matter where [a hero's] remains are interred — it can be on an anthill, it can be on a mountain, on a plain surface or in a river-but that spot where he is buried is now a monument and a shrine' (Newzimbabwe.com, September 3, 2010).

Monuments like the Heroes' Acre are mythologised as the sole 'Official ... monument ... [that plays] a unique role in the creation of national identity because [it] reflect[s] how political elites choose to represent the nation publicly' (Forest and Johnson 2002, 256). This officialised and narrowed-down representation of national identity is undermined and dismantled online by ordinary people.

Alternative versions of nationhood (see Mpofu 2014a, 2016) suggest that monuments like the Heroes' Acre and national holidays 'rather than being sites of consensus building ... [have] become contested terrains' which are not passive visual statements, but active 'elements in a public discourse definition' (Osborne 2001, 17–18). These contestations have led to definitions (and redefinitions) of what it means to be a hero or even a Zimbabwean.

### **Ethnicity and heroism**

The 1980s, Zimbabwean state and nation formation was hampered by the yet-to-be addressed issue of tribal tensions that characterised the liberation movement. Ethnicity has been, for a long time, 'not merely an empty identity marker of identity, but a value-laden political tool that influences political life in Zimbabwe' (Mpofu 2013, 116). Entry into state power and control, according to some citizens participating in social and online media debates, are tilted in favour of the dominant Shona (who are characterised by intra-ethnic tensions) (Mpofu 2014). Currently, the Zimbabwean national project stands as a 'permanently stained ... cloth of postcolonial nationalism (Worby 1998, 566), owing to the 1980s genocide which claimed well in excess of 20 000 mainly isiNdebele-speaking people, who were seen by Mugabe as supporters of his opponent, Joshua Nkomo. This, in a way, informs myths on national insiders (Shona) and outsiders (Ndebele). Thus, ethnicity has made national hero determination debates more complex. There are suggestions in citizen journalists' debates that ethnicity influenced the denial of hero status to Lookout Masuku, a former ZIPRA military commander whom ZANU-PF

believed to be an architect of the dissident insurgency of the 1980s. Joshua Nkomo's assertion that 'political and ethnic grounds' (Kriger 1995, 153) were used to deny Masuku that status lends credence to the argument. Further, the grand narrative of the liberation struggle privileges ZANU-PF (and mainly the Shona ethnic group's versions of events) creating the myth that Shonas and ZANU-PF liberated Zimbabwe. This myth was advanced by ZANU-PF arguing that 'during the war ... ZAPU was withholding guerrillas from the battlefield' (ibid, 151) and post-independence withholding them from joining the army, hence they operated as dissidents.

Ake (1963, 3) argues that in most African countries nationalism has mutated into 'political ethnicity when the nationalist movement, which was united mainly by common grievances, started to disintegrate on the verge of independence as its leaders manoeuvred to inherit power'. These movements were characterised by ethnic tensions and a lack of intra-group cohesion, as they consist of ideologically opposed sub-ethnic groups. In the absence of a larger body of scholarly writing, many possible and unconfirmed interpretations of how ethnicity informs national heroism are discussed in online media. Even though the veracity of some discussions cannot be ascertained, it is important to consider discourses from ordinary citizens as a cognitive prism through which they discursively engage with one another and with those in power.

Online debates suggest an awareness that ethnicity is one criteria that ZANU-PF allegedly uses to confer hero status. Although contestable, a few cases suffice to highlight arguments that validate this assertion. Methuseli Moyo, a revived ZAPU spokesman (now with Joice Mujuru's newly formed People First opposition party) wrote in Newzimbabwe.com (March 8 2011) after the death of Thenjiwe Lesabe: 'Lesabe's passing-on also brought into perspective ZANU-PF's slide back to Gukurahundi mode, which says there can be no heroes in ZAPU, worse if they are Ndebele like Thenjiwe Lesabe ... ZANU-PF demonstrated this through denying Lesabe heroine status'.

In response to Methuseli Moyo's opinion piece, JJ (March 8 2011) wrote that the selection of heroes

is partisan and tribal. ZAPU is the first political party to be brave enough to openly talk about this ... [there is need for] condemning the privatizing of the national heroes system in Zimbabwe ... if you want ... guarantee [of] being a Zimbabwe national hero, you have to

be in no order; 1-Shona, 2-ZANU, 3-A thug. The most important of these is being a Shona of course.

The line of argument pursued here, is that ethnicity and party loyalty are the only credentials used to determine who can be buried at the national shrine. Further, JJ argues that ZANU-PF has adulterated the definition of a hero, by basing it on ethnic lines:

Lesabe is not the first national hero who fits the criteria NOT to be a Zimbabwean national hero. The criteria NOT to be a national hero in no specific order is that 1-You have to be part of ZAPU; 2-You have to be Ndebele. Being one of these is bad, being both GUARANTEES that you are not a national hero. There are countless examples of this; Gibson Sibanda (ZAPU & ndebele), Lookout Masuku (ZAPU & Ndebele), Thenjiwe Lesabe (ZAPU & Ndebele)... The list is too long. (ibid.)

JJ thus addresses certain taboo/sensitive issues in African politics – matters to do with ethnicity are criminalised and rarely discussed in Zimbabwe’s public media. Most post-colonial ethnically diverse countries would rather promote national identity at the expense of ethnic identity. Being ZANU-PF is conflated with being Shona, by seemingly Ndebele discussants like JJ. Again, use of words like ‘you’ has a different meaning from the way Tsitsi Maguvaz uses ‘our’ ‘we’ and ‘us’. The ‘you’ in JJ’s post is specific to a Ndebele ethnic in-group or subnational group. This demonstrates the fluidity of identities and the tensions involved at different stages. Sometimes ethnic debates become combusive both on- and offline, with protestations of discrimination against Ndebele-speaking people and their regions. When discussed online, ethnicity becomes a touchy subject, causing discussants like Ben Bown to argue that some things should not be said because they are divisive. In a comment Ben Bown states:

@JJ, Can you stop talking about Shona and Ndebeles in such different light .... these are people who are country men and women. Jesus! I have looked at each one of your postings and its all about how bad the Shonas are, please spare us! Why not talk about imminent issues like sanctions on Zimbabwe, Tsvangirai, Mugabe etc ... that is less divisive. (Newzimbabwe.com, March 8, 2011)

Here, Ben Brown suggests that ethnic particularism and the institutionalisation of differences perpetuate conflict and division. The appeal to speak about issues that affect Zimbabwe, rather than about ethnicity, seems to suggest that since ethnicity is constructed it can be reconstructed into new shared 'consociational forms', while overlooking the extent of such reconstructions (Nangle and Clancy 2012).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the foregoing it is clear that citizen journalism has empowered ordinary people based both in the homeland and the diaspora with a voice and access to alternative public spheres where they engage with the media, those in power and others. Such interactions keep certain topics on the public agenda, since they are of interest to people in the host country, or even internationally. Citizens' participation in identity debates by using alternative spaces 'illustrates that ordinary people have strong, long-standing opinions about the future of the nation and national identity and will express their opinions when an outlet is provided to them' (Kaftan 2013, 167). This outlet is not available to many poor Zimbabweans, however, who rely on radio. Moreover, contrary to Appadurai's (1996) and Hobsbawm's (1990) arguments, modernity, technological advances, globalisation and the mass movement of people have not undermined national affections, but have rather made it possible for people to participate in important debates. This assertion complements global scholarship which abounds with case studies on how technological developments (internet and its enabling technologies) challenge the notion that the territorial integrity of a nation equals cohesive national identity (Chan 2005; Eriksen 2007; Evered 2000; Sheyholislami 2008, 2011). Instead, citizen journalism and participation in debates around monuments and heroes show how new media are used as tools to express the public's ideas on the conflictual rituals of national identity making. This article has highlighted the problems associated with authoritarian and politically self-serving narratives and the use of monuments like the Heroes' Acre. ZANU-PF's heightened and exclusive appropriation of these symbols as tools for political survival came at a time of mass dissent, sanctions and intraparty friction. To maintain political hegemony, ZANU-PF has used, among other things, such monuments and recognitions. However, new media give people a platform to deconstruct ZANU-PF's imagined nationhood. Citizen journalists' debates largely demonstrate the 'national interest', while ZANU-PF advances a provincial and political self-serving nationalist agenda to ensure its

political survival, more than anything else. Yes, some debates were supportive of ZANU-PF's constructions of identity in the online media studied. It is a weakness of this article that, due to space constraints and the particular line of focus, those sentiments supportive of ZANU-PF's configurations of national identity, using the Heroes' Acre and heroes, could not be entertained.

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