

Zimbabwe: New Statue, Old Chimurenga

Notes on Zimbabwe's Long Crisis

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In the city of Harare, Zimbabwe, the statue of one of the most famous spirit mediums in Zimbabwe's liberation movement history is set to be erected, with the government having produced a 3D rendering of the statue as a proposal. In a time when statues across the world are being removed for their gory reminders of power and oppression, the ZANU-PF led state government is erecting a statue of Charwe, the spirit medium inhabited by Nehanda, who led the initial fight against the British colonialists in the first Chimurenga of 1896-7.

As I write this, Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, who has been exposing corruption within the state and government was taken from his home and is being held- persecuted for his tweets- and has been denied bail several times. Jacob Ngarivhume, an outspoken activist who has been calling on Zimbabweans to protest and demonstrate against the ZANU-PF government is also being held on conspiracy charges against the state, following the planned protests for the 31st of July. He too has been denied bail.

Recently, Job Sikhala, a member of the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), was arrested for "inciting violence;" ZANU-PF code for speaking openly against the government and calling for collective action against the ruling party. Tragically, a young and well-known democracy activist, Patson Dzamara, died of cancer due to the lack of medical treatment in Zimbabwe; his brother, Itai Dzamara, went conspicuously missing in 2015, after protesting in the city centre and still has not been found.

According to National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe Executive Director Dr Godfrey Mahachi, the statue of Charwe is meant to "reposition Harare as a tourism hub" while it "reminds us of how our forefathers resisted colonial conquest." It has always been fascinating how this image of a woman, inhabited by the spirit of another woman is a representation of "forefathers." This seemingly innocuous statue which could easily signify a call for national unity, especially now when citizen unrest is building, is even more sinister than meets the eye.

It was only three years ago, when people gathered in the streets of Harare on the 18th of November in 2017 to send a message to then president Robert Mugabe. The streets were full of not just people, but the army itself, demanding his resignation. This was very strange in two ways: in previous situations of protest, under the Mugabe regime, the job of the army was to remove protestors by force and many times, by force of the bullet. Second, Mugabe was still the President of Zimbabwe and thus the Commander in Chief of the armed forces. and yet the army was not in the streets on his orders, so it was unclear (until later), why they were acting outside of command. It emerged that Mugabe's party, ZANU-PF, had turned against him and that Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa was on the run and reportedly seeking refuge in South Africa.

The last time we had seen Mugabe was a very sombre press conference, surrounded by generals

from the army. We had expected him to resign, but he did not. This is what the protest was for: to send him a message. People were ready for new leadership and they were looking to the army and to Mnangagwa to catalyze this new era.

While most Zimbabweans were celebrating and optimistic, including the now dissident and jailed journalist Chin'ono, others were, even then, skeptical and made known their feelings. Most distinctly, I remember Zimbabwean feminist and activist Everjoice Win ominously commenting "Shavi risingazivikanwe hari tambirwe," meaning in Shona "an inhabiting spirit that is unknown should not be received." In Shona traditional religion, the ancestors speak through spirit mediums, and if a spirit that is unknown inhabits someone, it cannot be received and allowed to relay a message.

Nehanda is widely known, in Zimbabwean Shona spiritual tradition, to be a spirit medium that lived before in the Munhumutapa kingdom of the 1800's, and always comes back to inhabit a living human, usually a woman, as a guide from the ancestral land. Nehanda, in this case, inhabited a young woman named Charwe who led the resistance against the settler colonists and therefore became one of the spirit mediums to be murdered and martyred by hanging. Her hanging was very symbolic; she represented the centre of Shona institutions from which all life and organisation is drawn.

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According to prominent historian Terence Ranger, when Nehanda and the male medium spirit of Kaguvi, Gumboreshumba who was also an ancestral spirit were executed, she spoke to the effect that her bones will rise again in the fight against colonialism. It is this prophecy that those who stood to fight in the second Chimurenga drew from to finally gain independence in 1980. It was not only a prophecy because Nehanda did come back and inhabit another young woman named Kanzaruwa who joined the liberation struggle and became central to recruitment and mobilisation for ZANU-PF. According to ZANU-PF liberation war commander Josiah Tongogara: "When we started the war the spirit mediums helped with recruitment...Mbuya Nehanda was the most important recruit in those days. Once the children, the youth and girls in the area, knew that Nehanda had joined, they came in large numbers."

It is important to note the relationship between the nationalist project of the liberation movement and writers of the same era, across the continent as well as in Zimbabwe. In this light, the figure of Nehanda was a significant symbol of the literature used to "imagine the nation." Appropriation of the image of Nehanda in the construction of the "nation" of Zimbabwe is significant in Solomon Mutsvairo's *Feso* (1956), Stanlake Samkange's *Year of the Uprising* (1978) and Charles Samupindi's *Death Throes: The Trial of Mbuya Nehanda* (1990) where they portray Zimbabwe as an "imagined community".

Nehanda and Kaguvi became images and figures of citizenship and in turn, belonging. In particular, *Feso* by Mutsvairo is considered by literary historian Kizito Muchemwa to be the "literary originator of an unproblematised ethnic nationalism". In *Feso*, Mutsvairo re-imagines the pre-colonial life of the Shona people through collective memory and oral tradition to set them as a civilisation and nation with great militaristic prowess. Centred around the Munhumutapa kingdom of the Great Zimbabwe civilisation, this rewriting was responding to, or writing as per Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, to the colonial myths with Shona myths of origin as a way of proving the legitimacy of the past civilisations of Africans.

In this way, Nehanda was no longer an individual but a nationalist symbol that defines citizenship, in this case, to the Shona people of which Mutsvairo writes. This is obviously problematic and exclusionary in several ways: citizenship and belonging to this imagined nation had already been determined as being Shona and masculine as represented by the militaristic might she is presented as. All of this, appropriated by ZANU-PF who are now and continue to be the central representation of struggle heroes and leaders and essentially as we come to see later on, owners of the land, identity and story of Zimbabwe through Nehanda. It is these same exclusionary ideas of nationalism that led to the Gukurahundi: genocide of the Ndebele people between 1983 and 1987 by the ZANU-PF state led Fifth Brigade who murdered over 20 000 civilians in the Matebeleland region. This genocide, sanctioned by Mnangagwa who was the Minister of state and security at the time, is still barely acknowledged by the ZANU-PF government. The image of Nehanda and its history are therefore a significant symbol of nationalism, which represents power and exclusion.

When I was in Harare for the Christmas of 2018, I stayed until January of 2019, to spend time with my parents before heading back to school in Cape Town. There were rumours of a planned action against the government, just one year since the Mnangagwa government had taken over. He had recently won elections, but things were rapidly deteriorating economically and there were signs that this new government was just as authoritarian as the previous one. The MDC was planning a stay away and calling for people to enter the streets of the city to demonstrate against the government.

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I heard rumors of a possible internet shut down but did not think the state would resort to that, “what would it serve?”, I thought, to myself. Within a day of the rumors, I noticed the WiFi connection in my home was down. I tried using the mobile network data, but that was also not working. I began to ask around the house and everyone noticed the same thing, on each of several differing mobile networks. That is when I knew.

This was the first time this kind of action had been taken by the state in Zimbabwe, and it was shocking, but not nearly as shocking as what happened next. When there is no access to the internet, when most people rely on platforms like WhatsApp to communicate, things become very scary. You do not know what is happening, even in the next neighbourhood, so you are forced to stay in place. Through phone calls you only hear stories and perhaps rumours of what is taking place across the city of Harare and the country, which makes you even more fearful and isolated.

We heard stories of the military going door to door in the locations asking for those responsible for planning the stay away. Many were beaten, others killed, and many more brutalised and robbed. But it is hard to tell how many and where; without social media or reliable journalism it was and impossible to report the scope of repression with any certainty. Just as disheartening was the inability to inform the rest of the world of what was happening to us. If I managed to go online briefly, when the internet opened up for an hour or two, and with the security of a VPN, there was simply no news on Zimbabwe. A blackout. Trying to connect to others across the country was impossible, and the work of journalists was rendered impossible.

Isolated from the world, we were all in terror of what would happen to us in our homes, and with no one there to witness it. It would not be on the news, in Zimbabwe or anywhere else in the world. I felt the feeling I have felt in Zimbabwe for most of my life: powerless. Except, this time it was utterly defeating. I felt what the state wanted me to feel; that they were in control and in charge of our very lives. And this is the same feeling I have now, when I see the rendering of that statue, a foreboding, as people are once again disappearing or begin arrested for speaking out against ZANU-PF.

There is a school, a hospital, a street,
(Even a brothel, you say?)
Maybe two or more than two
of each of these
in one or more than one town
across the whole nation
of the people's memory
of she
whose name now
is a discarded wheelbarrow
a spent firebrand
a hollow shell
that has seen better days.
Those she inspired (or inspires)
now conspire against her
and look away from her
embarrassed
as they tuck wads of banknotes
(Ill-gotten gains, you say?)
into their soiled briefcases.
For these, too,
her bones were resurrected.

Charles Mungoshi, [Nehanda](#) (2008)

However, it seems they no longer “look away from her embarrassed.” The maternity ward she is named after is in a country where health workers are fighting for a decent living wage and safe working conditions. A medical doctor from one of the main hospitals in Harare showed photos of stillborn babies wrapped in cloth, writing that of eight pregnant women who went into labour that

day, only one had made it out with a baby. Earlier this year, three opposition party representatives, all women, were kidnapped and tortured by the police. Joana Mamombe, Cecilia Chimbiri and Netsai Marova had their womanhood weaponised to “show them their place”. They were subsequently arrested for “lying” about said abduction, as if the violation itself was not enough.

It is perhaps fitting then that a hanged woman sacrifice is the representation of this militaristic government. The only respected woman in Zimbabwe is in the form of a statue: silent, and in stone. The only woman ZANU-PF reveres is a spirit.

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