

Race, Land and Memory in Zimbabwe

I was twelve years old when the first invasions of white-owned farms by Zimbabwe's war veterans were announced on television. The year was 2000. What followed, a decade in which we experienced the spiralling of the Zim dollar and the subsequent food shortages, electricity and water rationing, as well as political violence, was a kind of nightmare that forced us to grapple with our history.

History has been repeatedly evoked, at times eloquently, at times brutally, in Zimbabwe over the past one-and-a-half decades or so, as a means of justifying, among other policies, the country's Fast Track Land Reform Programme. We, its people, have been caught in a recurring, closed loop in which we are coerced into living in a heavily edited and glorified past as an answer to, or more accurately, diversion from, the current miserable socio-politico-economic state. At the same time, international intervention in the "Zimbabwean problem" has become, in historic fashion, an exercise in amnesia, where countries such as Britain, while glossing over their colonial involvement in the country, partake in an obscene form of Western voyeurism on the suffering of Zimbabweans.

Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform Programme, which was spearheaded by the country's war veterans in the year 2000 when war veterans invaded white-owned farms - an action that was soon after endorsed by the government - justifies itself through history. But what history? And what justifications are being made?

Indeed, the question of land in Zimbabwe is inexorably tied to the country's history. It's both a historical and a philosophical question; the local people were violently kicked off their land by Cecil John Rhodes and his British South Africa Company in the 1890s, who took control of the land on behalf of the British Crown. In doing so, the white settlers upset the local peoples' relationship to the land, introducing modern capitalism and the concept of land as a commodity. A brief history of Zimbabwe and its land can be found [here](#).

Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform Programme, which was spearheaded by the

country's war veterans in the year 2000 when war veterans invaded white-owned farms – an action that was soon after endorsed by the government – justifies itself through history. But what history? And what justifications are being made? The historian Terrence Ranger, in his essay, "The Uses and Abuses of History in Zimbabwe," diagnoses the current history that is propagated by the Zimbabwean government as "patriotic history," a type of history which

"emphasises the division of the nation not only into races but also into 'patriots' and 'sell-outs' among its African population... 'patriotic history' has replaced the idea of Socialism by that of "authenticity"...it offers a highly selective and streamlined version of the anti-colonial struggle. It is a doctrine of 'permanent revolution' leaping from Chimurenga to Chimurenga...It is a doctrine of violence because it sees itself as a doctrine of revolution" (2005:8).

Ranger's description of the term "patriotic history" as being a "doctrine of violence" that is directly correlated to a "doctrine of revolution" has a direct link to the Fanonian view on decolonisation. As Fanon wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*, decolonisation is a violent, revolutionary phenomenon that seeks to get beneath the surface racial relations within a colonial society; it seeks to "change the order of the world," to disrupt a business-as-usual attitude, and to get at the social relations which enable racial fetish and its ties to land ownership in countries such as Zimbabwe.

The imbuing of Mugabe with "ancestral wisdom" is a powerful and effective tool. For one, it has elevated Mugabe to some god-like status, thwarting attempts at any meaningful critique of his failings and branding all such critique as "Western-motivated," as if the people of Zimbabwe could not possibly think for themselves.

But how, exactly, does this "patriotic history" work in Zimbabwe? President Robert Mugabe's ruling party ZANU(PF) propagates this type of history by relocating the country's pre-colonial values and rituals and transposing them to the present as a mythical "deep ancestral memory." Here we have a game of smoke-and-mirrors, in which the past is made malleable, but unquestionable, for to question a "sacred" past is to render oneself a "traitor." An article in the Zimbabwean *Sunday Mail* (2003) by historian Professor Tafataona Mahoso reads:

"Mugabe is now every African who is opposed to the British and North American

plunder and exploitation...So, old Mugabe here is not the person of Robert Mugabe. Rather it is that powerful, elemental African memory going back to the first Nehanda and even to the ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians who are now reclaiming Africa in history as the cradle of humankind."

The imbuing of Mugabe with "ancestral wisdom" is a powerful and effective tool. For one, it has elevated Mugabe to some god-like status, thwarting attempts at any meaningful critique of his failings and branding all such critique as "Western-motivated," as if the people of Zimbabwe could not possibly think for themselves. More importantly, it allows for state-aligned intellectuals (the kind Edward Said cautions against in his essay "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals"), such as Professor Tafataona Mahoso, to say, without irony, that the "spirit of Cecil John Rhodes" has appeared "in the most aggressive, photogenic, restless and boyish body of British Prime Minister Tony Blair" (*Sunday Mail*, 25 February 2003).

The utilisation of pre-colonial history does the work of evoking in the citizenry memories of the past and linking them to what is happening in the present—Rhodes the colonialist has reappeared in the form of Tony Blair the imperialist—while speaking in an intimate local linguistic form (that of local traditions and ancestral spirits). The evoking of Rhodes and his deliberate linkage to Tony Blair also brings to mind the violent means by which the white-supremacist state of Rhodesia had to be removed, and the lives that were lost by the country's war heroes. In linking that violence to the post-2000 violent struggle to wrest the farms from white farmers, an ideological parallel and justification is evoked; in line with Fanon, the ethos of struggle for the colonised can be but that of violence as a tool of emancipation. Just as violence is the oppressor's tool, along with other sophisticated forms of economic and cultural persuasion.

But how does this transposed pre-colonial history that is imbued with ancestral values and is embodied in the form of individual persons operate within 21st century Zimbabwe? Could it be argued, for instance, that it seeks to contribute to a revolutionary impetus by imagining different forms of societal organisation? To consider this, one must note that the social relations in Zimbabwe post-2000 are different from how they were in the 1970s just before the country's independence in 1980.

In the 1970s, the struggle for independence was fought using guerrilla tactics and aggressive rhetorical modes of persuasion in the form of imploring speeches

made by the guerrilla parties' nationalist leaders, thus garnering local support as well as international political, economic and military support from countries such as the USSR that had their own Cold War agendas with Western Europe and the USA. In the 2000s, the country's ruling party ZANU(PF) was no longer a guerrilla party, but was and still is the dominant party in the country in full control of Zimbabwe's judiciary, finances, army and state bodies. Yet, it has positioned itself rhetorically as a guerrilla party—in this way “justifying” its use of violence as a method of decolonisation while concurrently abusing the state's civic bodies as a means of oppression of its citizenry—still in the trenches fighting to free the Zimbabwean people from Western dominance (the invasions of white-owned farms starting in the year 2000 were named the Third Chimurenga —the Third Liberation Struggle—evoking the First Chimurenga in the 1890s and the Second Chimurenga under the nationalist parties during the 1970s).

*As Fanon argues in *The Wretched of the Earth*, this transposed history is nothing more than the tactic of a ruling elite that, “unable to open the future (for its people) or of flinging them onto the path of national reconstruction, that is to say, their own reconstruction,” keeps them in perpetual remembrance of a heavily edited, dreamy past as a means of preventing them from reckoning with their present circumstances.*

Hence, this revived ancestral memory becomes a corruption of the past as means not to genuinely transform the present, but to manipulate it at the expense of the citizenry. Its main purpose is to facilitate ideological arguments and to solemnise rituals, with no intention of a genuine follow-through that can offer a real structural change for the citizenry. As Fanon argues in *The Wretched of the Earth*, this transposed history is nothing more than the tactic of a ruling elite that, “unable to open the future (for its people) or of flinging them onto the path of national reconstruction, that is to say, their own reconstruction,” keeps them in perpetual remembrance of a heavily edited, dreamy past as a means of preventing them from reckoning with their present circumstances.

Nevertheless, knowledge in and of itself can be a multi-purpose tool, and who is using it and to what ends can become more important than its intended purpose. Thus, can this ancestral memory and the working up of the citizenry by the ruling elite be utilised in ways other than what the ruling elite have intended? Can it benefit those who wish to bring to fruition in the periphery their societal ideas of

being and self? This depends, in large part, on how those who participate in revolutionary activity view and understand themselves.

Thus the question: what role does land play as a revolutionary symbol to be reclaimed? In former colonised spaces, the racial fetish of colonialism cannot be separated from the commodity fetish of capitalism; both go hand in hand. The white man, by virtue of the colour of his skin, was historically advantaged during colonial times. Concurrently, the emergence of modern capitalism in Europe, which was exported to the periphery, enabled Europe to siphon the periphery's natural as well as human resources to enrich both itself and the white minority that lived in and governed the colonies.

During colonial times, the Rhodesian government subsidised its white farming population, giving it not only favourable market prices, but banning black peasant farmers from selling their own produce at the same favourable rates. Furthermore, the white population was given the best arable land in Rhodesia, while blacks were cramped in and made to farm on poor land. As such, race and capitalism are historically inextricable. Hence, the attempt to leave the fate of a historically disenfranchised, formerly colonised people to "the market," and to deride attempts by post-colonial forms of political organisation to economically and politically subsidise their populations is an ironic instance of feigned memory loss. Or is it an extreme case of reification by proponents of liberal capitalism and the free-market enterprise?

In former colonised spaces, the racial fetish of colonialism cannot be separated from the commodity fetish of capitalism; both go hand in hand. The white man, by virtue of the colour of his skin, was historically advantaged during colonial times. Concurrently, the emergence of modern capitalism in Europe, which was exported to the periphery, enabled Europe to siphon the periphery's natural as well as human resources to enrich both itself and the white minority that lived in and governed the colonies.

Linked to the question of land in Zimbabwe is also that of the complex, dialectical identity of many white Zimbabweans. A brilliant case study of the conflicting ideas of self harboured by many members of the country's white farming community, illustrating, among other things, the poor race relations in the country and how many white Zimbabweans haven't worked through, or been

afforded the spaces to safely work through, their colonial history, is the book [*The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Farmer's Voices from Zimbabwe*](#) by Rory Pilosof. The white Zimbabwean exhibits residues of the white settler community “which calls itself ‘liberal’,” to quote Fanon, and yet “demands nothing more nor less than twofold citizenship” while “setting themselves apart in an abstract manner.” Indeed, white Zimbabweans and their offspring have in the past held dual citizenship, of both Britain and Zimbabwe; this privilege of dual citizenship was never extended to black Zimbabweans.

As such, the impetus by the country’s black citizenry to reclaim land ought to be understood within this historical framework, which continues to affect contemporary relations. This does not mean that such an impetus is pure and not prone to manipulation and corruption, as is evidenced by Zimbabwe’s ruling elite and the corrupt systems under which the country operates today. However, it is important to recognise it as a logical impetus for formerly colonised peoples who are attempting to realise their ideas of self and being in a concrete reality. This ability to realise ideas of self and being rests on the material, on the power to self-direct resources into one’s community. Without material resources, ideas of self and community cannot become concrete or a reality. As such, the self-realisation of the peoples at the periphery cannot happen without their having access to material resources, which Africa has in abundance. Land becomes a crucial material as well as ideological symbol.

But how do the people ensure responsibility from a rogue government that is unable to move them into the future but that utilises the past as a means of keeping them in check? This is the question. The Zimbabwean state and its abuse of history as a means of self-preservation, even at the expense of the citizenry, is a case in point.

In terms of land as a metaphysical and philosophical entity, it’s interesting to note that the restructuring of land by the colonial settlers in the late 19th century was not in line with the ways in which value was allotted by the local people at that time. To quote Lawrence Tshuma in *A Matter of (In)justice: Law, State and the Agrarian Question in Zimbabwe*:

“an assumption, deriving from English jurisprudence, was that King Lobhengula as sovereign had proprietary title in all the unallotted land in his kingdom. As land was not a commodity among the pre-colonial people of Zimbabwe, Lobhengula

enjoyed neither ultimate nor proprietary title akin to that which had emerged during the transition from feudalism to capitalism in England” (1997:14-15).

As such, reclamation of land as a symbol of decolonisation and emancipation needs to go beyond simply replacing white owners with black owners. A “new species of man” is desired, as Fanon states. Because of the implicit ties between the racial fetish and the commodity fetish, and thus capitalism, a carefully planned and well thought out land reform programme can also be seen as an invitation to the peoples at the periphery to experiment with different forms of societal organisation. Otherwise, the kind of relations that have been going on under the racial fetish carry on, only with a different form of fetish in place that entails both the fetishised and those doing the fetishising having the same skin colour. In Zimbabwe, much of the redistribution of land has been centred on “loyalty” to the ruling party. The land reacquired via the Fast Track Land Reform Programme is mostly under the trusteeship of the government, a government that has divided its citizens into “patriots” and “sell-outs” and that reserves the right to decide who is a “true Zimbabwean” so that these individuals can be rewarded accordingly.

The land reacquired via the Fast Track Land Reform Programme is mostly under the trusteeship of the government, a government that has divided its citizens into “patriots” and “sell-outs” and that reserves the right to decide who is a “true Zimbabwean” so that these individuals can be rewarded accordingly.

At the same time, one must note that it’s difficult for the peoples at the periphery to experiment with their own forms of societal organisation. There are pressures to become part of a unified world, via globalisation. And yet, globalisation, the notion of a unified world with the West at the centre still, is the continuation and consolidation of an oppressive structure in which the majority of the black and brown peoples of the world still retain their “peripheral” stature. As such, attempts by the periphery to realise itself and experiment with social modes that may grant it some level of autonomy from the centre are always thwarted by the centre, be it via political, economic or military means. The Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel, in his edifying treatise, *Philosophy of Liberation*, puts it thus:

“...imperialism cannot afford to lose the political control it exercises over

peripheral countries, because it would lose markets that yield enormous profits. That is why popular liberation, the seizure of power by popular groups, threatens the very survival of the entire system of the centre, of capitalist social formation" (1985:76).

Now that Africa is the last frontier of economic expansion, in order to breed the consumer-crazed sheep of tomorrow (or today already) there is the "Africa Rising" narrative (rising on a Western narrative and on Western sensibilities and terms)—the "African" is finally a human being, but to qualify as such one must be a special kind of African, the middle and ruling class kind, who has been coopted into capitalism's project and is able to participate as a profit maker on capitalism's ledger. Meanwhile, those rands and shillings are ultimately going back as profits to the headquarters of the multinationals to once again enrich the centre, the Western spheres, leaving petty change at the periphery.

Can this be said to be a genuine step forward in the periphery that brings it closer to edifying its own existence and realising its own societal ideas of being and self? Clearly not. What then are the conditions that are necessary for decolonisation in Africa, and in countries such as Zimbabwe where land plays such a central role to this process? What role can land play in this successful decolonisation? How do we ensure that decolonisation is not hijacked and coopted by corrupt state mechanisations? How do we utilise our history to catapult us into a just and equitable future?