



# ERASED MEMORIES: Re-couping Zimbabwe's humanity

By Novuyo Rosa Tshuma



I was born in 1988, eight years after Zimbabwe's independence from British colonial rule. I am thus considered a "Born Free" — meaning one born after the liberation war. For a long time, particularly over the last two decades and the fraught turmoil we have endured as Zimbabweans, the term has been used to denigrate those of us who were born into freedom from colonial rule and did not experience the struggles of the liberation war.

Robert Mugabe, for me, has always been a figure of ambivalence. This is because many people from Matabeleland, where I come from, have always had a great loathing for him. As a child, I was never able to fully understand why.

It was only when I began working on my novel *House of Stone*, which has been my way of trying to understand and grapple with the many faces of Zimbabwe's past, that I came face to face with one of these faces, Gukurahundi, the genocide in Matabeleland and Midlands that occurred in the 1980s, shortly after independence. Gukurahundi was something I grew up knowing about, for it is spoken about among the people of Matabeleland with great pain and in fearful whispers; it's taboo in Zimbabwe to remember the genocide, and those who remember these "criminal memories" are constantly punished.

It is for this reason that the genocide was something I knew *about* but did not *know*. This ambivalence about working through our pasts as well as our presents is something I grew up with; it's the tentativeness born from having to live in a state of physical or psychological violence. This ambivalence was amplified in 2001 when I was in my teens and when our socio-politico-economic meltdown started - when things became so unbearable for my family, as they did for millions of Zimbabwean families, so much so that we had to leave for South Africa in search of a better life in 2009.

This culture of erasing whole peoples and their experiences from the geographical, communal and imaginative space that is Zimbabwe is not unique to the past two decades; it's an indelible part of our Zimbabwean history, as Gukurahundi exemplifies.

Ambivalence was a necessary condition for us to go about living, loving, celebrating, mourning and dreaming amidst the constant stress of the empty supermarkets, the never-ending scuffles in the queues for food and money, and the abuse lambasted at us by Mugabe and his advocates on state media. Politicians and army generals would pop up on state television during election time declaring that there would be war if the populace dared to vote for the opposition party, MDC, and that Zimbabweans who did not support Zanu (PF) and its doctrines were traitors and sell-outs who deserved to be expelled, ideologically, communally and most terrifying of all, violently, from the Zimbabwean imagination. This culture of erasing whole peoples and their experiences from the geographical, communal and imaginative space that is Zimbabwe is not unique to the past two decades; it's an indelible part of our Zimbabwean history, as Gukurahundi exemplifies.

Many of my family members found Gukurahundi too difficult to talk about when I asked them as part of my research for *House of Stone*, as it brought up so much pain. This pain is not just a pain about what is past—for the past is never about the past, but is about the future and dealt with in relation to the present. It's very much a pain that endures in the present, since those who went through Gukurahundi are not acknowledged by our communities and our country, meaning they are not able to freely mourn their dead, exhume mass graves, perform rites, build shrines, work through their trauma, and come together in remembrance and healing - things that are done for other periods in our country's history where great suffering and loss was endured, such as the liberation war.

In her introduction to the book [Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe](#) on the Catholic Commission Report on the genocide — the said report which euphemistically described the genocide as “disturbances in Matabeleland and Midlands”— writer and human rights activist Elinor Sisulu writes:

*“The Shona expression ‘Gukurahundi’, meaning ‘the first rain that washes away the chaff of the last harvest before the spring rains’, used to have pleasant connotations...In the 1980s the term Gukurahundi assumed an entirely new meaning when the North Korean-trained 5 Brigade murdered thousands of people in the Zimbabwean province of Matabeleland and parts of Midlands. Both the 5 Brigade and the period of mayhem and murder they caused were called Gukurahundi, which is why, since then, the word Gukurahundi invokes nothing but negative emotions among Zimbabweans, ranging from indifference, shame, denial, terror, bitter anger and deep trauma, depending on whether one is a victim, perpetrator or one of the millions of citizens who remained silent.”*

My research for *House of Stone* showed me that Gukurahundi was not just “something terrible that happened” and gave me an opportunity to confront the experiences and testimonies of the victims who endured it. The Catholic Church Commission Report has the most comprehensive of these testimonies, including reports about the goings on at places such as Bhalagwe Concentration Camp, which was near Antelope Mine in the Kezi district of Matabeleland South. Here, horror is told of

sharp objects being forced up women's genitals, of civilians being forced to have sexual relations with donkeys and beaten up if they refused. Other reports relate water torture, which included drenching the victim's head in a bucket of water, and then the perpetrator jumping on the victim's stomach until he vomited blood.

The atrocities committed during Gukurahundi, then, were not just against the people of Matabeleland; they were also against Shona as a language and as a culture, against the humanistic values and precepts that this language and culture carries, and thus, against the Shona people as well.

In the villages, civilians were made to dig graves, and then forced to watch as their loved ones were ordered into these graves and shot; they were then forced to cover the mass graves, and then dance on top of these graves while singing praises to Mugabe. It has been very confusing for these victims because although the genocide was not an ethnic one (civilians from Mashonaland did not come to Matabeleland and commit these acts on the civilians there); the specially trained 5 Brigade that committed these atrocities were mostly Shona speaking, and would force the mostly Ndebele civilians to chant praises to Mugabe in Shona while dancing on the graves of their loved ones.

Thus, language was abused as a tool of terror, and has caused great trauma to the victims. The atrocities committed during Gukurahundi, then, were not just against the people of Matabeleland; they were also against Shona as a language and as a culture, against the humanistic values and precepts that this language and culture carries, and thus, against the Shona people as well. Many Zimbabweans don't seem to know or understand exactly what happened during Gukurahundi, and why this period looms large for its victims and their communities. Hence the importance of working through our histories. (More on the findings by the Catholic Commission Report [here](#).)

Having to read, watch and listen to these testimonies caused me to break down. I wept for our people, for their humanity, for their dehumanisation, and for the silence that continues to surround what they went through. Yet, witnessing and re-experiencing was a necessary step, *is* a necessary step, towards empathy, towards being able to *see* others.

The culture of violence around Gukurahundi in our country encourages a looking *around* but not a looking *at* the victims who experienced it and who live with its scars. Many discussions about the genocide tend to weaponise the victims; as tools and symbols for justice, for instance. Though justice *is* necessary, weaponising the victims in this way — as symbols caught in this dehumanising glare, without fleshing them out as human beings whose humanity we seek to recover and honour — has the ironic effect of de-centring them, so that we are unable to *see* them and thus *witness* with them, which is the first step towards building empathy, and prioritising them and their healing.

Perhaps, with this landmark removal of Grandfather after thirty-seven years from the office of President, we can begin to look our histories in the face and work through them.

Perhaps, with this landmark removal of Grandfather after thirty-seven years from the office of President, we can begin to look our histories in the face and work through them. This is something we ought to do for our own sakes, as a matter of moving into a future that honours our humanity, as Africans, and makes sure the cycle of violence that has been unacknowledged in our country right from its inception does not keep repeating itself.

Many eulogies, odes and critiques have been written about Grandfather since the army's soft coup,

the protest marches, and his resignation. In many of them, Grandfather has been the towering centre. Even in the bitter criticisms about him, he remains, ironically, the main visible figure in the glare of the indicting spotlight. Furthermore, the Mugabe who is alternately deified or indicted is not Mugabe the person; he is objectified to represent the land reform programme, for instance, or Zimbabwe's excellent education system, or Gukurahundi, or the liberation war, or our recent desperate decades of destruction.

I think of these abstractions of Mugabe as a manifestation, in our languages and our psyches, of the authoritarian culture we have lived with for the past thirty-seven years. It has led not just to physical and political violence, but has also affected us psychologically and culturally, leading to a narrowing of our imaginings and thus our vocabulary. In all of this, Mugabe the person, Mugabe as a person, is lost, and in it, we, as people, as well as our humanity, are lost, too.

It's ironic, isn't it, that in order for us to recoup our humanity, we need to recoup Grandfather's humanity, too? In humanising him, we are removing him from the deified aura he has sought to build around himself and that others have helped to build around him, which has affected how we experience reality, rendering us imprisoned in his glare and thus unable to look *at* and *see* one another. This deification has also influenced the kinds of values we have come to prioritise in our country, such as "cleverness," which we tend to use to describe acts of corrupt wheeling and dealing.

In humanising him, we also humanise ourselves.

It would be so very easy to dehumanise Grandfather; the impulse is there. I loathe him for what his governance put us through, for what he has come to represent for us. I lost loved ones in the last two decades who didn't have to die - aunts, uncles, and cousins, some only children. I hate that this kind of loss became normalised; our cemeteries overflow with graves, many of them child-sized.

It's ironic, isn't it, that in order for us to recoup our humanity, we need to recoup Grandfather's humanity, too? In humanising him, we are removing him from the deified aura he has sought to build around himself and that others have helped to build around him, which has affected how we experience reality, rendering us imprisoned in his glare and thus unable to look *at* and *see* one another.

Why do I keep emphasising humanity, Grandfather's humanity and our humanity as Africans? Because African lives, right from the time of colonisation, have always been rendered "unimportant" and thus fit for being sacrificed for "the greater good." African lives have always been deemed fit to wait a little longer for the recognition of their humanity; for the sake of "unity" or "progress," we shove aside the protests of the suffering and the dissenting. This is manifested in the way in which they, African lives, remain a clump of shadows in our discussions about our societies, never meant to disturb any glare that we wish to shine on those in power, be it celebratory or accusatory. In this sense, African lives become weaponised, and thus sacrificial, for other wars we claim to fight in their name and for their well-being; wars against Western imperialism, for example.

In this sense, Mugabe - the misnomer we continue to use to describe wholesale pasts and futures - has the unwitting effect of perpetuating authoritarian culture and its intolerance for contradictions and the existence of multiple realities and truths. This misnomer also erases us from the human glare. By using it to describe wholesale pasts and periods, we render ourselves as existing *because of* and *thanks to* Mugabe the abstraction.

Our mythologising of these abstractions, then, sets up our *de*-humanisation— we become enthralled

with the myth, and in tying our narratives about ourselves to it, in banking *our* humanity on the myth's existence and endurance, we shackle ourselves to upholding it at any cost, including the cost of denying and brushing aside the experiences of, and thus de-humanising, those in our communities who have horrific experiences and memories that shatter this myth. Like the victims and survivors of Gukurahundi.

Ironically, it's in Mugabe's humanisation, and not *de*-humanisation (we do not seek to de-mythologise him as a matter of stripping him of his humanity, which is as much a stripping of our own humanity as is the act of deifying him), that we realise our own humanisation, too. In the spirit of working with what one has, we can use the weapons that authoritarian culture has used to build itself over the last thirty-seven years to free ourselves from it.

All of this was facilitated and justified ideologically by the land reform programme, known as The Third Chimurenga, which I think of as the hijacking of real and true grievances for nefarious purposes.

We ought not to, for instance, if we are to recognise our humanity, talk about the honeymoon years of Zimbabwe's independence, its education policies and prosperity for its citizens, without talking about and witnessing the victims and survivors of the Gukurahundi genocide. In the same way, we can't talk about the land reform programme, which as a concept and a process was necessary (land was always at the centre of the liberation struggle) without talking about everything else that was done to the people of Zimbabwe over the past two decades in its name: beatings; Operation Murambatsvina; facilitation of corruption; repression of freedom of speech and civic participation and gatherings; rigging of elections and withholding of election results; abduction of activists such as Jestina Mukoko and disappearance of activists such as Itai Dzamara; conflating patriotism with supporting Zanu (PF); considering Zimbabweans who do not agree with Zanu (PF)'s doctrines as "non-Zimbabweans" and "un-Zimbabwean"; and criminalising the discussion of our pasts, both pre- and post-independence.

All of this was facilitated and justified ideologically by the land reform programme, known as The Third Chimurenga, which I think of as the hijacking of real and true grievances for nefarious purposes. It is true that corruption and genocide are used by Western governments to blackmail non-Western leaders to conform to the unfair way the world is run. It is also true that corruption and genocide are used by non-Western leaders to coerce their populations into accepting the ways they run them. In all of this, one thing endures: African lives remain abstract in the imaginations of colonial and post-colonial societies, and are considered easy or somehow justifiable collateral, readily cast aside, unwitnessed, and swept under carpets so as to pave the way for authoritarian re-imaginings and the deifying of those in power.

A democratisation or opening up of our societies also entails a democratisation and opening up of our language and our imaginings. Instead of using "Mugabe" or even "Mnangagwa" as short-cut terms for both our dreams and nightmares (as metaphors they are inaccurate because they erase or hide other individuals and groups who have contributed to these dreams and nightmares), we may do well to try to be concrete, and in this way expansive, in our vocabulary. These misnomers carry so many histories; we use them to capture the vast events we seek to evoke, yet they end up contradicting these events. Words matter; how we use them matters.

In re-couping our humanity, I'm imagining a kind of practice that offers a third way for African lives. A way that centres them and honours them as real and concrete. A way that says: *African Lives Matter. Ubuntu—I Am, You Are, We Are.*

---

*Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).*

*The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.*

*Follow us on [Twitter](#).*

