



# Prettys, Engaged Intellectuals and Hypnotic Calm: A Visitor's View of Zimbabwe

By Kalundi Serumaga



Perhaps the deep silence - the initial unscripted reaction of the gathered crowd at Harare airport - upon laying eyes on the casket carrying the remains of Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's first independence president, and one-time icon of Africa's independence struggles, was the best expression of the mood of the country, and its people.

It was neither a moment for despair by his followers, nor one of grim satisfaction, or even celebration by his rivals and erstwhile critics. It seemed like a point of sudden deep reflection, an opportunity to ponder on what had been the meaning of the struggles that defined the life of the man just gone.

This is a question much of sub-Saharan Africa should be asking itself in relation to their own earlier struggles for independence.

Africa has travelled a long road in a relatively short time, between the onset of the colonial enclosures and today, but remains dogged by intense challenges.

So, as Robert Mugabe was accorded every honour befitting him as the one that dedicated most of his life to making Zimbabwean independence a reality, the question remains: what now for Africa, and how shall the Africans cope in the meantime?

It is a complicated story. From the time of the rogue regime of Ian Smith and his Unilateral Declaration of Independence (essentially a white settler mutiny, between 1965 and 1979), Zimbabwe has laboured under various economic sanctions and other economic handicaps.

This can seem like a challenge unique to the country. But the fact is that no African country was really allowed to settle down and make its own path after independence. Nothing has changed since. It is quite unrealistic to expect “normality” to exist in places whose histories never allowed them to ever take root.

Zimbabwe simply has its own particular features. The country is beset with food, fuel, electricity and work shortages. Even paper money is scarce, with a lot of transactions undertaken via mobile phones using a digital currency. This has produced a people of remarkable forbearance, who still work to protect what is important to them. Or perhaps they were always like this?

None of this should deter the visitor: it is the common experience, to one degree or other, of all of our post-colonial spaces.

However, hardship should never be celebrated or romanticised either. When endured for too long by too many, it can cause social, familial and psychic damage.

This is a very large country, but one that can be traversed relatively easily, as compared to say Kenya, Ethiopia or Uganda, due in part to the wide, multi-lane highways running through relatively flat, open country where large farms are being gradually absorbed into what will be a very wide city within greater Harare, and just beyond.

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Food production and distribution remain somewhat held up in the halfway house created by the incomplete and problematic land reform programmes of the 1990s and early 2000s, leading to the shortages and the high prices.

Basically, it is a crisis borne out of the independence government's gradual realisation that the West had quietly abandoned its promise to fund any black land reclamation programme from the white settler economy as a guarantee of the negotiated settlement that ended the liberation war. This led to a period of violent land seizures driven, it would seem, by anger, as much as a need to actually address the very real land hunger problem.

As a result, not enough land was transferred to shift food production's centre of gravity away from the settler-built model, and yet not enough land was left with that model for it to continue its colonial role of pumping out mono-cropped harvests for the global markets, so as to at least remain a foreign exchange earner. And of the land that was taken, too much of it ended up in the hands of persons best placed to take advantage of presidential anger to benefit as land owners, but not necessarily as productive farmers.

None of this was then helped by the on-off drought that has gripped all of southern Africa since about 2015, as well as Africa's general economic IMF-related challenges. This is what Thandeka Mkandawire, the Scandinavian-based Malawian economist, said in a 2013 interview about our situation:

*“You know, the collapse of African economies in the main period of structural adjustment was deeper and lasted longer than the American Great Depression...We call the structural adjustment period the ‘lost decades’ and so on, but I don’t think that captures the economic decline of that period. We should be calling it the Great African Depression. There are some who suggest that Africa should forget about structural adjustment and look ahead. But people are still writing books about the American Great Depression to this day. Nobody says ‘don’t write about the Depression anymore, it’s over’. And in Africa, it’s still not over. Many countries in Africa have not fully recovered, have yet to reach their per capita income of the 1970s, so it’s still there.”*

An interesting study would be to see which countries in the region are coping best with the situation: those following the model of the larger-scale, somewhat mechanised white settler agriculture, or those that retained elements of African smallholder farming?

As Uganda’s Professor Mamdani once succinctly explained it, “Drought is not the cause of famine; it is merely the occasion for it.”

To what extent is the food shortage problem a structural one, an act of nature, or a product of dislocated smallholder farming?

For example, in all the supermarkets I shopped in, there never seemed to be a shortage or rationing of manufactured pet (mainly cat and dog) food, as there was for items for human consumption. And because of the food production structure described earlier, the supermarket system remains central to the food distribution system as a whole.

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Nearly all of southern Africa has a critical experience distinct from the rest of the continent: with the exception of Kenya, it is only Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe (southern Rhodesia), Namibia, South Africa and (to a smaller extent), Zambia (northern Rhodesia) that experienced large-scale European settler arrival and domination.

Reclamation, therefore, may have to be much more than a question of land acreage. It may well have to involve a reclamation of the pre-settler knowledge of how to use the land in a sustainable African way. That, ultimately, is a cultural question. But where are the custodians of such knowledge to be found, and how will they be consulted?

## **Human-made culture**

A visitor may, therefore, focus more on the human-made culture, and less on geographical landmarks.

There is Mbira month, held every September. Created in 2012, and driven by the tireless Mr Albert Chimedza, a dreadlocked elder in the tradition of the musical instrument, and Director of the Mbira Centre in Harare, the month focuses on teaching and holding performances around this ancient instrument.

Chimedza does not simply play the instrument; he brings a whole philosophical dimension to how and why it remains an important part of the expression of Zimbabwe cultures. He is driven by his intense concern about the dereliction of African excellence.

“A lot of traditional African music now does not sound good, not because it is inherently bad, but because our instruments are badly made.”

The Mbira Centre also manufactures this ancient instrument, often referred to as a “thumb piano.” It manufactures - to order - some of the most exquisitely made examples, from fine wood and polished metal. Chimedza is even working on a prototype for one that can be digitally interfaced.

African culture, and the tools it employs, should not be an afterthought, something taken with leftovers after all the best energies, minds and materials have been expended on other more “useful” things. That is a legacy of an as yet unresolved colonial trauma, he argues.

### **“Tribal historians”**

This point was brought to me in a different way during a very fortuitous afternoon I was honoured to share with Dr Aeneas Chigwedere. After a long career in education and politics, where after becoming the first black headmaster of a major secondary school, Chigwedere served variously as an elected Member of Parliament and also Minister of Education, Sports and Culture between 2008 and 2013. Now in his eighties, he lives in retirement just north of Harare. Open and generous with his knowledge, Chigwedere challenges the entire way in which African Zimbabwean history is conceptualised and therefore recorded.

His very first book, *The Birth of Bantu Africa*, written in 1982, was greeted with hostility by the then academic establishment, leading to him being labelled a “tribal historian”. His once citing of a spirit medium during an academic presentation did not help narrow the gap.

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Since then, in his twenty-five or so works, he has explored the migrations and settlements of the various Africans who make up Zimbabwe. He has explained their dynastic structure, founding myths and migration legends, linking them to the civilizations of the Nile Valley.

His work basically echoes Dr Chiekh anta Diop’s assertion that “The history of black Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of ancient Egypt.”

In central Harare, just off from the main road to the gallery, one finds the Theatre in the Park, run by a team of very quietly determined managers. It offers new venture in theatre. I was very lucky to find myself there on the night one Stella Chiweshe performed. This lady, now in her seventies, established a global reputation as a Mbira player, as well as an actor and dancer from the 1970s onwards. It was a rare appearance for her in Harare, I am told.

This could be contrasted with the Reps Theatre, which I dropped in on. Despite an old history of also once grappling with old Rhodesia’s race laws, it strongly reminded me of the 1970s/80s Donovan Maule and then the Phoenix theaters in the Nairobi of my youth: with a strong orientation towards a certain European vision of culture and of performance mainly for the consumption of Europeans and for the “education” of Africans.

But a well-resourced orientation at that. An old colonial association between the country and branch of the wealthy English Courtauld family left the country in possession of many very valuable works of

Western art.

Rhodesia established a “national” gallery in 1953 which, by 1974, was able to hold an exhibition of works by Gainsborough, Van Dyck, Panini, Reynolds, and Rembrandt, which are still in its possession. Now called the Zimbabwe National Gallery, it seems to be one place where all this broad span of contradicting legacies meet to form a very unique memory.

The work of weaving them together falls on the shoulders of the current director, Dr Raphael Chikukwa. So in the space of six weeks, between November and December last year, he held an exhibition of its collections of Rembrandts, during which a competition was also held, in which Harare visual artists were asked to re-imagine some of the Rembrandt classics in their own styles.

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This was then followed by an exhibition titled “African Independence, Norwegian Solidarity”, in which the Norwegian embassy supported a travelling exhibition displaying an enormous archive of the actors and formations right across southern Africa that fought against settler colonialism, as well as the Scandinavian solidarity movements that sprang up to support them. Both exhibitions attracted interest from a very broad reach of Harare society as it stands.

### **Relics of colonialism**

Further meanderings in central Harare took me to what I shall have to call an antiques shop. By this I mean a shop selling all manner of bric-a-brac and general items from former households. There were typewriters, old fishing gear, scout badges, colonial coins, cigarette cases, furniture, books, analogue cameras and tape recorders, and even more typewriters and everything else that once made up the busy-ness of a (largely white) life. It was as if this is where the old Rhodesia was still being quietly disposed of. I bought a few small mementoes, and paid by phone under a sign telling customers that no old coins would be accepted.

It got me thinking about the old south London neighbourhood of Norwood, in the suburbia centred on Croydon, where I once lived in the 1980s. The high street held clusters of shops disposing household items clearly from the 1940s and 1950s. One could find quality wooden furniture, classic wristwatches, and elaborate men’s shaving kits bound up in fine leather pouches.

Many of the items were well-crafted and actually quite beautiful, made before late capitalism made the Western world plastic and utterly disposable. I took them to have once belonged to men, once young, who were now passing on, or relocated to retirement homes.

It was the same with cars. Harare road traffic can be divided into three groups. There are numerous very high-end modern cars that would not be out of place in any affluent European city. On these, opinion is divided. “Those are the people draining the Treasury” is one fixed view. Another is that it is prudent Harareans keeping their money in a high-value moveable item that can be quickly converted into dollars should a sudden misfortune occur.

Another group is made up of well-maintained Japanese vehicles from the 1970s and 1980s vintage, plus more than a few colonially classic early Land Rovers – often driven by white Zimbabweans.

A third is venerable European classics from as far back as the 1950s. I expressed idle curiosity in

one, a venerable Vauxhall Victor parked at one of the many quasi-formal dealerships on the roadside. "Someone just bought it," I was told. A white lady had been there the day before, and paid \$2000 in cash of the \$2500 price. Maybe she was buying back a memory.

None of this exempts anyone from the ubiquitous fuel queues, where vehicles of all eras line up, stretching around street corners for hours on end. There, everybody is just about equal.

It is the same again with the city's architecture: Dutch/Boer revivalist; Rural English; 1960s English municipal; colonial English; Soviet brutalist; and Chinese modernist styles all stand side by side, illustrating which was the dominant influence at any given time.

The absence of an overt police presence on the streets suggested a generally good security situation in Harare at least. And even when present, they were not bearing firearms, unlike Uganda, where the AK-47 has basically replaced the truncheon.

A lot of the ordinary townsfolk one meets, be it on the street, assisting with parking and the like, are clearly fairly well-educated, not to mention resourceful.

After weeks of messy hair, I was forced to walk into an office and ask the gentleman at reception to help a brother out: did he know of any barbers in the neighbourhood?

His directions brought me to Mbuya Nehanda Street, where the vibe changed. It was a little more like a Kampala "downtown" neighbourhood. As we were in the holiday season, long queues of people waited to board buses taking them upcountry. Only the very orderly Zimbabwean queuing style reminded me that I was not in Kampala, or Nairobi.

That stillness of spirit seems to be encapsulated in the myriad of intriguing stone sculptures you will come across standing in large mute groups in sales gardens. If a way could be found to ship them cheaply, they could be a useful export earner for the country.

The barber arrangement is to have large crowded halls made up of numerous individually-owned stations where someone may work on you. It is a very female-dominated space, Asian hair extensions evidently being in very great demand among Harare women. Upon asking if they also "do men", I was directed to an impassive, brown lady whom I took to be the manager when she said "Please sit down." I think she took my hesitation as scepticism. In fact, I was worried that she was going to wander off in search of a barber, and explained that I did not wish to wait long. "No", she said, "I cut men's hair" and immediately whipped out a nice smartphone, and handed it to me. She literally had a video advert of herself working on a customer, as well as clips from a local TV station that once did a feature on her. Meet "Pretty" (her trade name), a one-woman advertising agency. (A small tip: Some Harare barbers prefer customers to come with their own hair clippers, "because of illnesses".)

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Finally, there was Domboshawa, just directly north of the city, which presents as a national tourism site. Its most protected area is near the top, where ancient cave paintings can still be seen. The great rock formations are of greater interest not for their physical splendor, but for how humans have related to them.

I immediately recognised it at a shrine, very similar in dimension, quietness and purpose, to Walussi (“the hill of Horus”) in my native Buganda. Being surrounded in the main by large farms, it had the air of having been cut off from its original pilgrims, possibly by displacement, and then the “trespass” laws those farms may have brought at the time of their establishment.

I made sure to make offerings and prayers from the caves at the very top, and all the way down, wherever water met with the rocks.

I prayed for Zimbabwe. May she overcome her current challenges. And she will, as long as it has Prettys, engaged intellectuals, and the hypnotic calm radiating from Mbira music. And Zimbabwe will always have those.

If you have travel plans, visit Zimbabwe. You will not regret it.

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