



Erasing History to Silence Resistance: From Moi to Mugabe and De Klerk

By Tinashe L. Chimedza



Myth-making, revisionism, and the way the powerful - broadly defined - use state and other apparatuses to rewrite history and the past have resurfaced in the past few weeks.

First, after the death of Robert Gabriel Mugabe in Zimbabwe, the ruling party and state institutions went to great lengths to rewrite history, edit out Mugabe's tyranny and re-project him, warts removed, as a "great Pan-African" and "founding father".

Second, following the death of Daniel arap Moi in Kenya, the ruling political class, state institutions and the public discourse were flooded with uncritical hero-worshipping (except for a few critical voices) and deliberate stampeding to obliterate the warts of his 24 years of rule and project him as Baba (father). Third, more recently in South Africa, former President De Klerk disputed that apartheid was a "crime against humanity" and that when the United Nations made the declaration, it was under the influence of "communist control".

In this article I point to the reasons why the arena of history, memory, myth-making and remembering is a landscape of fierce contest, especially because the powerful want to revise the record, deliberately rewrite historical suffering out and re-project feudal benevolence and authoritarianism as progressive.

Importantly, what can be called “history wars” is often the ruling class and its ideologues exercising a “class project” to form narrative bulwarks to protect their ill-gotten advantages, to secure their rule, and to hide historical injustices. Sometimes these advantages and injustices are portrayed as being inevitable consequences of human progress. The muddling of history cannot be separated from how post-colonial leaders learnt from “empire” and “capital”. Empires fiddle with historical narratives even when there is evidence of “drips of blood from every pore”.

Apartheid and the Nyayo House torture chambers: Contests over history

Debates over history have flared up in the context of three significant events: one, the death of Robert Mugabe, who ruled Zimbabwe for close to four decades; two, the aftermath of the death of Daniel arap Moi, who ruled Kenya for two and a half decades; and three, the ferocious blowback after FW De Klerk said “apartheid was not a crime against humanity”, in South Africa.

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The contest around how Africa’s “Big Men” and how apartheid is remembered can be termed *history wars* in which the past is being fiercely debated. After all, when the historian Howard Zinn wrote a “people’s history”, it was an attempt to project the past from the point of the underbelly where voice and action are often muted by powerful interests. It is not enough to leave historical narratives to officialdom, which often seeks to make myths and heroes of men (and a few women) whose contributions are projected in a monologue.

The political class especially, has no qualms erasing a lot of from the archives. From the Roman, British and what has been called the “American’ empire”, there has been a systematic project to wipe out memory, rewrite history and shape narratives to suit the interests of those that hold political, social, cultural, religious and economic power.

Blowback in South Africa

In South Africa, at the State of the Nation Address (SONA), the young radicals of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) pitted their political wits against the ruling African National Congress (ANC) over the presence of FW De Klerk in the joint seating of the National Assembly. The EFF’s stance against De Klerk was torched after the former white minority leader appeared on national television and claimed that “apartheid was not a crime against humanity”. But things even got worse when the De Klerk Foundation released a statement that seemed to claim that since apartheid “did not kill so many people”, it could have not been a crime against humanity. The foundation went further, claiming that when the UN made the declaration that apartheid was a crime against humanity, it was controlled by “commies” (communists).

The blowback was immediate: major political parties demanded a retraction; some demanded that FW De Klerk’s privileges be stripped and that a campaign be started to have the Nobel Committee rescind the Nobel Peace Prize from him. The De Klerk Foundation issued a statement retracting the statement and apologising for the “confusion”.

Running in the background of these contests is the way the white minority is busy trying to separate historical injustices from the state of poverty and marginalisation of the black population. The white-owned business empires built and sustained by a state-backed violent political and social system of inequality remains unchanged and the black underclass is being prepared, slowly, to accept the

current wealth patterns as inevitable.

The remaking of Robert Mugabe

In the aftermath of the death of Robert Mugabe, state institutions, the public media and the military were mobilised to celebrate Robert Mugabe as a “Pan-Africanist”, and “founding father of Zimbabwe”. Even the opposition, which was subjected to terrors of Mugabe-ism, made a beeline to the funeral to bury a “statesman” (so they claimed). The funeral at the National Sports Stadium was organised over days, and there was an attempt to build a mausoleum at a cost of millions in a country facing starvation. (Elsewhere, from Zambia, Kenya and across to Ghana, first or even second presidents have had “shrines” or mausoleums constructed so that the nation never forgets its heroes.) For some, especially within the ruling party, projecting Robert Mugabe as a hero was also about inserting the ruling party as the sole platform of liberation. Siphon Malunga, a lawyer and the son of Sydney Malunga, a veteran of the liberation movement, observed the following about Mugabe:

He mastered, deployed and instrumentalised violence, demagoguery and hate for political ends. For the most part it worked well for him until it was used against him. Having drawn and tasted blood of 20,000 Ndebeles in the 1980s, he considered the death of a few hundred MDC supporters in 2008 child’s play, boasting that, of the multiple academic degrees he held, he coveted most his degree in violence (*Africa Report*, September 2019).

This must also be read through a window of what Professor Terrence Ranger called “patriotic history” in Zimbabwe, in which the past is revised so as to entrench the political, social and economic domination by the liberation movement. But even within the liberation movement, there have been concerted efforts to write out the role of the Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), including the fact that the historical archives of Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) led by Joshua Nkomo were confiscated. The report of a commission of inquiry into the brutal killings in South Western Zimbabwe lies buried in state vaults and we are left with only reports from human rights organisations.

Baba Moi: Kenya’s “professor of politics”

In the aftermath of the death of Daniel arap Moi, who ruled Kenya for over two decades, the nation was almost stampeded into a monologue about the death of a “father”, the passing on of the “professor of politics” and nationalist. It was almost a choreography of how other “Big Men” have been buried: a full public spectacle, stadiums, mass body viewing, full military honours and wholesale praise in full pages in newspapers, television and radio. Those who tried to go against the tide were either berated, pushed to the margin or accused of “failing to forgive”. Here is what Father Gabriel Dolan wrote on 22 February 2020:

When Kenyans were tortured and dehumanised in the Nyayo Chambers and detention cells, it was a crime committed by the state. It was state terror. The question arises then as to who was responsible for the heinous crime: the individual officer who meted out the torture, the state agency that mandated the punishment or the one at the top, the Commander-in-Chief? If we are ever to be reconciled with our tormentor, whose responsibility is it to initiate the process? How does a regime repair the damage it has done to its citizens?

But the *Standard* would not publish this critical narrative and Father Gabriel Dolan had to resign for the second time, following the first resignation with eight other columnists in April 2018. It took a lot of courage for a few critics to hold the banner up and demand that the warts of the one-party state be remembered, that the “ethnic wars” (some fanned by the powerful) be remembered, that the economic collapse and wholesale looting not be forgotten. Chief amongst these were former victims

of the Nyayo torture chambers, like Koigi wa Wamwere who said that the “death of Moi is an opportunity to engage with his legacy”.

This silencing of the voices of the underclass also has colonial roots. A good example is the gulags of colonial Britain so intelligently chronicled by Caroline Elkins in the 2015 publication, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag* and others memoirs of the past that have put into the public space the horrors of the past.

Why does history and memory matter for tyrants?

There is an interesting scene in a classic 2006 movie called *300*. Leonidas, representing the Spartans, walks to confront Xerxes, whose army was rumoured to be so powerful it “drank the rivers dry” and so vast “it conquered all he set his eyes on”. Leonidas rejects to be colonised and made a war lord of Greece”. Xerxes’s ignites into fury and this is what he says about history:

I will erase even the memory of Sparta from the histories. Every piece of Greek parchment shall be burned. Every Greek historian and every scribe shall have their eyes put out and their tongues cut from their mouths. Why, uttering the very name of Sparta or Leonidas will be punishable by death. The world will never know you existed at all.

The contest over history and memory matters, especially for tyrants. In Kenya, for example, President Moi named institutions, roads, primary and secondary schools, hospitals and a university in his name. In Zimbabwe, the airport was renamed Robert Gabriel Mugabe International Airport, a university was being constructed in his name and when the new president took over, a naming spree has started in which his name is given prominence. There are several reasons why tyrants close the archives of a nation and why those with political, cultural, social and even religious power always want the nation to “forget and move on”. Chief among these reasons is to bury accountability.

Firstly, if we take the global history of “empire” and “capital”, it becomes clearer why the political and capitalist classes want history to be forgotten. Here the thread of how history is edited goes back to how capitalism emerged with “blood pouring from the pores”. Looked at this way, the ruling class is not interested in history because it will reveal who took what, when, how and where it is located; in other words, the ahistoricity of the ruling class is in fact a class consolidation project.

Secondly, the narrative of history that projects certain people as heroes means that a trajectory of their inevitability to rule over the “rubble” is established and undisputed by mere mortals. The history of empire always revolved around the genealogy of the hereditary lines of inheriting the kingdom and with that the privileges of power, wealth, and slaves and the right to author culture and religion too.

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So the mantle is passed from Jomo Kenyatta, via Moi to land into the hands of “Mt Kenya” again via Jomo’s son, Uhuru Kenyatta. On the other hand, the reins of Oginga Odinga slowly pass into the hands of his son Raila, and finally Moi’s *rungu* is now passed down to his son Gideon. Writing the history of Kenya outside the dominance of these families is resisted and quickly discredited and the government moves quickly to work on appointing an official historian so the stories of heroes, heroines and their feats for the nation can be told, not from the forests of the Mau Mau or the

streets that fought against the one-party state, but from the families and cronies who share the country's fat.

Thirdly, the politics of "order" or the "status quo" depends on stable rule, which is why liberalism is projected as "the end of history" - the last stage in the evolution of mankind so that it guarantees itself as the only logical mode of rule.

Fourthly, it is also about the displacement of alternative ideas, so that society is not tempted to play with other ideas and as such it means the silencing of resistance. Understood this way, history told by the political class is meant to displace counter-hegemonic projects that are possibly emancipatory.

Decolonisation and writing back: From Ngugi to Novuyo

After being imprisoned, Ngugi wa Thiong'o wrote *Wrestling with the Devil: A Prison Memoir*, which chronicles the terror of the Nyayo era and the molecular ways in which pain was inflicted. Many other "prison notebooks" have been written, including Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* and Aleksandr Solzhenstyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, which chronicled the horrors of Stalinism in Russia and how opponents were dehumanised without relent.

Taken together, these books represent an important way in which ideas considered "dissident" continue to form a counter-hegemonic bulwark against the monologue of the ruling classes. The writers above, against often bleak conditions, wrote back to the powerful and because of this courage we have a better peek into how structures of suppression and exploitation worked and continue to exist and are not only objects for the archives.

These brilliant minds spent a painstaking amount of time, sometimes risking their lives, smuggling hurriedly written notes and writing on toilet paper so that officialdom narratives could be poked. Across the African political landscape, from Zimbabwe to South Africa and Kenya, fortunately, the writers and activists have been writing back against the monologues and revisionism of those in power. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie issues a gentle reminder about why multiple stories must be told:

The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult...Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanise. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.

South Africa has a rich tradition of political leaders and activists writing memoirs, meaning that the terrors of apartheid can never be buried under officialdom and revisionism. In Kenya, the past has been documented, and as highlighted above, the horrors of the Nyayo "error" refuse to be edited, obfuscated and stampeded into silence. In Zimbabwe some new literary explorations are constantly questioning the past, as told by the ruling elites. Novuyo Tshuma's *House of Stone* falls into this category in which the past terrors of state-sanctioned killings, abductions and torture are powerfully retold. While the vaults of the state remain closed, the citizens' voices are refusing to remain silent.

These contests over memory, history, and remembering are much about the present and the future and this makes, very appropriate, Chimamanda Adichie's caution that "the single story must be rejected".

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