

# **Alterity, and Recharging ‘Othered’ Voices: The Agency of Spirit Possession in Identifying Dead Guerrillas for Reburial as Depicted in Makanda and Vambe’s *Ndangariro dzeHondo dzeVachakabvu muZimbabwe (Reflections of War from the Dead in Zimbabwe)***

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## **Abstract**

After the controversial 2008 presidential elections in Zimbabwe, there was a flurry of claims from children, young adults and some ex-combatants possessed by the spirits of guerrillas who died in Zimbabwe’s Liberation of the 1970s. Some members of political opposition parties in the country dismissed this cultural and spiritual phenomenon as another example of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) party’s gimmick to create new narratives with which to perpetuate the party’s monopoly of power (which began in 1980). Some Christian and Pentecostal churches dismissed the spiritual phenomena as either faked, works of quacks or the doing and manifestation of the handiwork of demonic spirits despite the fact that spirit possession is not new to Shona people. Since time immemorial, spirit possession announced its authority as another way of knowing, explaining and arriving at contested historical and religious truths. The aim of this article is to critically interrogate oral stories narrated by the dead combatants through the agency of spirit possession. I do not focus on the original stories in their oral forms. Instead, I analyse the spiritual voices of dead guerrillas as published narratives contained in the book, *Ndangariro dzeHondo dzeVachakabvu muZimbabwe* (hereafter, NDDM) or *Reflections on War by the Dead in Zimbabwe* (Makanda & Vambe, eds, 2015). The main objective of the

article is to explore what happens when oral stories drawn from the context of spirit possession are fixed as written narratives. This central objective informs other objectives of the article which are related to the agency of spirit possession in identifying the remains of dead guerrillas for decent reburials. The article argues that the modernity of spirit possession is that it asserts the presence of the departed in human life and that the possessed speak the language of national reconciliation, attack greed, corruption and bemoan the shrinking democratic spaces of freedom in Zimbabwe. Other themes that are voiced through narratives of spirit possession in the book relate to the voices of the forgotten dead combatants: voices viewed in the book as cultural sites of public memory and remembrance. The article asserts that spiritual voices in spirit possession mark the existence of an indigenous knowledge system that can generate political narratives which can be used to counter and alter officially-sanctioned monolithic narratives of war and peace. Furthermore, the possession of children and young adults as represented in the book complicates the very cultural practice normally associated with established adult mediumistic practices built around clan authorities in Zimbabwe.

**Keywords:** deceased guerrillas, spirit possession, memories archive, alterity, Otherness, post independent Zimbabwe

## **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

Between 2008 and 2015, with the approval of the Ministry of Culture of the Government of Zimbabwe, some surviving ex-combatants of the Zimbabwe liberation struggle began a program of recording, on celluloid tape, the spiritual voices of dead combatants who manifested through children, young adults and some surviving ex-combatants who had participated in the struggle to liberate Zimbabwe of the 1970s. Surviving ex-combatants worked with the department of the Museum of Zimbabwe to record, collect and gather the spiritual voices of the dead speaking through spirit possession of people in different parts of Zimbabwe and Mozambique. The teams of ex-combatants and villagers visited rural areas in the province of Mashonaland central, such as Chesa and Chibondo in Mount Darwin, North East of Zimbabwe. Other teams composed of ex-combatants worked in the province of Manicaland in the rural areas of Rusape, and Chipinge in East of Zimbabwe, in Chimoio, in Mozambique.

Some ex-combatants visited the province of Mashonaland Central in the Guruve rural area which is in North-west Zimbabwe. The encounters and conversations between the surviving ex-combatants and the spiritual voices of the 'dead' ex-combatants were recorded on tape. I was not part of the recording exercise and so it is not easy for me to know how the surviving ex-combatants and the villages obtained ethical clearance from the government authorities which in part approved this program.

However, in 2015, a Harare publishing company called Africa Institute for Culture, Peace Dialogue and Tolerance Studies obtained the recorded materials and proceeded to transcribe them. The end result was the publication of a book called *Ndangariro dzeHondo dzeVachakabvu muZimbabwe (Reflections on War by the Dead in Zimbabwe)* (Makanda & Vambe, eds, 2015), hereafter abbreviated as NDDM. This book is circulating in the Zimbabwean public sphere, and it is the printed or published version of the recordings contained in the form of the book that my article aims to analyse as a primary source. Since the oral recordings now exist as a written document of the physical copies of the above cited book, the shift from the oral to a fixed written format is noteworthy. What is lost from the oral recordings are the paralinguistic features such as sound, gestures, pictures of real people associated with the vibrancy of the context of oral performance. As such, an oral text is hypostasised when made into a book. Notwithstanding this loss, what is gained when oral texts are transformed into published texts is that the oral text assumes a new permanent existence in the form of a book. A book can circulate more widely than oral texts, and books can be read and interpreted by readers not directly involved in the creation of the original oral text. While the oral recordings remain a significant source of oral archive, a book extends the idea of archive in the form of a written document that enables future scholars to intellectually reflect on it in different contexts, and to emerge with potentially alternative meanings that require a different methodological approach to tease out the meanings from the content of narrative conversations and exchanges between the surviving ex-combatants and the spiritual voices of the dead ex-combatants. A book does not necessary cease to become a source of indigenous knowledge because it is a published text. In fact, the oral stories recorded by the ex-combatants become narratives, socially constructed precisely at the moment that the oral stories formed the basis of the book. .

Although the stories in the book analysed in this article retain their original verbatim words as in the oral recordings, the very act of transcribing

the stories involved some level of creative stylisation which introduced the idea that the stories in the present book form are ordered in ways that conformed to the aims of the publisher. To the extent that oral stories are narrated from certain perspectives, the oral stories make use of images and become depictions or representations of some meanings other than those meanings simply imagined or intended by the dead ex-combatants at the point of performance. This view is supported by the cultural critic, Stuart Hall who observes that events, relations and structures do exist separately from the discursive, but ironically, it is only within the discursive that oral words and events around them are constructed within meaning. In Stuart Hall's (in Bobo 1992: 66) words, 'how things are represented and the machineries and regime of representation play a formative, not simply an expression or reflective, place in the constitution of social and political life'. When the above idea is put differently, and as observed by the critic of historiography, Hayden White (1978: 82), 'stories are verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found*...'. In other words, oral narratives may claim to represent the actual, but in the process of storytelling what also emerges is the possible and the imaginable. Thus, any act of translating knowing into telling implies, paradoxically, the artifactualisation of facts, because 'events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them, and the highlighting of others, by characterisation, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view [and] alternative descriptive strategies...'.(White, 1978:84).

Thus it follows that NDDM (2015) is by virtue of the argument above, a work of art. It is a collage and pastiche because it contains multiple genres such as conversation, testimony, witness accounts by surviving combatants, spiritual voices of the dead, documentary evidence sites where atrocities were committed that can be verified, prose, popular songs and myths of eternal death and rebirths. The book is an instance of secondary orality in which the primarily oral and spiritual voices of the dead ex-combatants are now mediated through another form- the written form. I analyse the instances of spirit possession as narratives in the book representing alternative sites to recuperate indigenous knowledge systems related to other forensic ways of coming to terms with the trauma of war on the dead who vocalised their pain and that of surviving ex-combatants through whom this traumatic experiences was now being nationalised and re-signified with new meanings. My methodological approach is therefore, to describe NDDM (2015) as the primary source for analysis.

The act of narrating involves creative imagination and stylisation, and, therefore, in my view such a work of art can only be sufficiently explained using qualitative methods. Qualitative methods accept the premise that interpretation of narratives is subjective since there is no one uniform objective reality to which everybody can accede. Furthermore, the appropriateness of a textual analysis of the narratives in NDDM also derives from an understanding that there is heterogeneity even within a cultural phenomenon such as spirit possession that is assumed to have similar values of a group of people or congeries of spiritual voices that take themselves as representing the subaltern classes in society. The task of the critic is to account for or explain the variations in views, ideas and ideals as manifested in the stories by the dead ex-combatants. This article is also informed by secondary sources, in particular, the works by Agamben (1998) on oral and written imaginative works as forms of witness and archive. Theoretical views on reburial, mourning and views that complicate notions based on assumptions of uniformity of values expressed through family/community/nation are also borrowed from the works of Butler (2006), Burnet (2012), Shoko (2006) and Fontein (2006). Depelchin's (2005) theory of deconstructing silences in African history is of particular significance as it suggests that oral institutions such as spirit possession can be sites of potential recuperation of African voices.

Historical accounts 'written' or 'narrated' from the bowels of earth can confirm themselves as witness and archive (Agamben 1998) of the war and its aftermath. Such narratives also sometimes refuse to be manipulated into positive official uplifting narratives of the heroic myths of war and peace. The themes that dominate the narratives of the voices of the fallen combatants are varied: desire for official recognition; demand for decent burial; desire for reunification and reconciliation with families, communities and nationhood. The voices of the dead also critique pathologies of greed and corruption among the country's leaders which run contrary to the vision the 'dead' combatants fought and died for. But, before analysing the stories in NDDM (2015) ) as narratives of spiritual challenge to the self-serving nationalist historiography authored by officials and commissioned academics, it is important to briefly comment on Zimbabwe's cultural policy, if only to enable the article to broaden an understanding of the intellectual context within which to evaluate the agency of spirit possession in new identity formations in post-independent Zimbabwe.

## **Cultural Policy of Zimbabwe Document of 2015**

The cultural policy document of Zimbabwe recognises traditional knowledge systems and recommends that 'Our traditional knowledge systems should provide sources for the curriculum needs to our societies and such knowledge should be infused into the main school curricula' (2015, 15). However, what this document lacks is a nuanced description of a knowledge system. The insistence that African knowledge is 'traditional' recalls the colonialist negation of the contemporaneity of African knowledge systems. Alternative non-material knowledge systems such as spirit possession are not fully recognised in the cultural policy document and this is evidence that the Suppression Act of 1898 has not been repealed. That is why Mbembe (2002: 19) can get away with cultural murder when he incorrectly writes that when one is refiguring the archive, we should remember that:

The term 'archives' first refers to a building, a symbol of a public institution, which is one of the organs of a constitutional state. However, by 'archives' is also understood a collection of documents – normally written documents – kept in this building. There cannot therefore be a definition of 'archive' that does not encompass both the building itself and the documents.

The above passage shows the limitations of Afro-pessimistic approaches to Africa's Indigenous knowledge systems. It is not true that an archive is the sum total of a building and documents. Oral literature does not necessarily need buildings to exist. Its structures are the very people who live it as they perform it. Not all of what is selected by a 'constitutional state' and consecrated as *the* knowledge, amounts to all known or knowable knowledge. To the extent that in modernist terms an archive is a status conferred on certain facts and not others, there is reason to believe that not all forms of Africa's knowledge have been acknowledged or need to be recognised by official recognition in order to be validated as knowledge. Depelchin (2005: 4) argues convincingly that 'silences are facts which have not been accorded the status of facts' and to break out of these silences, one needs to go to an oral culture which never entirely fell apart, one and which could be recovered, though not in an intact form.

The fact that NDDM (2015) is based on a transcription of oral narrated

initially in the oral medium by dead combatants and then recorded on tape reveals that Africans continue to resort to their time tested knowledge economies to solve their pressing problems. Africa's knowledge systems that thrive on alternative moral economy of spirit possession are based on philosophical links between the living humanity to the unborn, and then the ancestors who are believed to be 'alive.'

### **Spirit Possession as Religious and Cultural Practice**

David Lan (1985:98) argues that the people whose ancestors can conjure rain, the source of fertility and life, 'own the land'. Although spirit possession is at the centre of Shona people, since time immemorial, it was associated with clan and national spirits called Mhondoros, mostly drawn from dead chiefs. During the Zimbabwean liberation struggle in the 1970s, mhondoros or national spirits forged amicable relations with the African freedom fighters and after independence in 1980, spirit mediums and families welcomed surviving freedom fighters and, 'cleansing them had become family and sometimes community obligations' (David et al, 2014: 37). David et al further observe that the manifestations of spirit possession were also occasioned by the fact that; 'The new government did not take seriously the need to cleanse its combatants who had now returned neither was it responsible for the restitution of those who had been offended by guerrillas or their collaborators' (ibid, 37).

Some of the dead guerrillas and surviving war collaborators had also committed atrocities against the ordinary populace during the war; as a result, some of the young men and children were possessed by the spirits of those ordinary citizens who had been 'offended' by their political kith and kin. This picture is complex because it suggests that the spiritual voices of the dead people were not in every situation ex-combatants. But the less serious approach to the welfare of the guerrillas changes in post-independent Zimbabwe when war veterans 'spearheaded activities of reburial of fallen heroes' (Shoko 2006:1). The perspectives on the relationship between spirit medium and guerrillas reviewed above are normative explanations that do not provide satisfactory answers to questions related to the agency of children, young adults and some ex-combatants who experienced intensified possession by the spirits of dead heroes, especially after 2008.

David Lan's (1985) anthropological study has now been overtaken by

events especially where he argues that spirit possession is a phenomenon associated with *mhondoro* spirits of chiefs. After 2008, children, young adults and some guerrillas not at all biologically related to fallen heroes became hosts of the voices of the dead combatants. Daneel (1988:52) suggests that the phenomenon of spirit possession was a 'kind of spontaneous war-mediumship' because it unusually manifested itself through children, young adults and some surviving ex-combatants and best describes the intrusion of the narratives of 'dead' combatants in post independent Zimbabwe. In other words, critics like Lan (1985) who have relied on narratives of the surviving combatants, written from officially sanctioned perspectives are partial. The spirit possessions of children, youth and surviving ex-combatants that occurred spontaneously after 2008, (published in NDDM, 2015) are not from chiefly backgrounds associated with original ancestors of the *mhondoros*. The above book, however, is not the first in Zimbabwe to embed spirit possession. In the novel, *Chaminuka: Prophet of Zimbabwe* (1985), Mutswairo recounts a moment in which one Pasipamire is possessed by the spirit of Chaminuka, one of the great ancestors of the Shona people. While in that trance, Pasipamire goes back in time to the origins of the Shona people. In the process, Pasipamire mentions Nehanda, Chaminuka, Murenga Soro ReNzou, Tobela and Mbire as the original ancestors responsible for protecting the Shona people. In reviving ancestors, Pasipamire populates the spiritual landscape of Zimbabwe, making the claim that Zimbabwe belongs to the Shona people. In that state of possession, Pasipamire ascribes Shona ancestors with the capacity to conjure rain. In other words when spirit possession is captured in the written form of the book or novel, it serves other ideological interests not anticipated in the narratives of voices of the dead ex-combatants.

A further point to consider before analysing the spiritual voices in NDDM (2015) is that the spiritual voices of dead ex combatants represent themselves as the new subaltern 'historians' in Zimbabwe. Their spiritual voices contest the official view that fifty thousand people died in the struggle. Accounts written by the combatants speaking from below earth in shallow graves and others whose bones are not buried but are scattered in different locations within the country refuse to be marginalised in the nation's narratives of war and peace. This fact alone offers what the critic, Fontein, describes as opportunities for 'radical alternative imaginations of the state' (2006: 167). Spirit possession itself is a competing cultural institution offering an alternative system of African indigenous knowledge production which indicates a possible

new dimension, namely that ‘true witnesses have perished’ (Maclean, 2008: 36). However, the fact that the ‘dead’ combatants chose to manifest their presence at a time of their own, and in their own language, may cast doubt on the official narratives of the state written by surviving guerrillas and professional historians’ textbooks for schools as the only authentic narratives of the Zimbabwean liberation war.

### **Spirit Manifestation as Cultural Forensics in NDDM (2015)**

One of the major themes that manifest in the conversations between the surviving ex-combatants and the voices of the dead combatants is the need by the dead combatants to have their remains remembered and recovered. In one of the songs, one comrade Mauya enjoins the villagers to sit down and remember the fallen heroes:

Garai pasi murangarire magamba vese vakafira paNyadzonya  
Zendekera mukoma  
Garai pasi tirangarire magamba akafira paChimoio  
Zendekera mukoma  
Garai pasi tirangarire magamba maimwana ka zvinogumbura  
Zendekera mukoma  
Sit down so we can remember all heroes who died at Nyadzonya  
Lean on your brother  
Sit down so we remember heroes who died at Chimoio  
Lean on your brother  
Sit down so we heroes, my wife, its pain to remember the dead  
Lean on your brother (NDDM:109)

In the above lines, Chimoio and Nyadzonia are sites of memory in Mozambique and Tanzania where Zimbabwean combatants died during the liberation. While these two sites have been officially memorialized in Zimbabwean history, the song also indirectly pays homage to those combatants whose remains have not yet been recovered. Another song suggests that the spirits of dead combatants still roam the forests without decent burial:

Tinongoti mberere mberere nenyika

Vamwe vakagarika zvavo mudzimba umo  
We just wander and wander in the forests  
While others are enjoying in their homes (NDDM: 146).

This song was sung during liberation struggle in the 1970s as a critique of the whites and some blacks who were enjoying themselves under colonialism. However, the re-deployment of the song in post-independence period, and the song's appearing in the context of the resurgence of spiritual voices of dead, re-signifies their narratives. The song becomes a critique of the officials who have 'forgotten' the dead ex-combatants, some of whose bones lie scattered in the forests. According to Shoko,

The exhumation and identification of the fighters is made possible through the cooperation of the burial committee, spirit mediums, prophets and local people who witnessed the massacres during the liberation war. The spirit mediums acts as host of a national spirit. He leads a group of young male mediums who call themselves 'comrades'. They sniff out the graves and imitate guerrilla fighters during the war. They declare that war is still on until land is redistributed to the landless blacks (2006: 7).

The account above largely links surviving combatants and established spirit mediums to the conversations with the spirits of dead combatants, and argues that these were critical in identification of the dead combatants. Also, and as argued by Kazembe (2008), women were possessed by the spirits of the dead combatants and greatly assisted in identifying unknown grave sites. In one rural area called Mapanzure in the Chipinge district of Eastern Zimbabwe one woman is possessed by the spirit of a dead chief. This chief who is referred to as Mambo (king) Chivhanga was not a combatant. However, as recorded in NDDM, Chivhanga was poisoned at guerrilla base called Hwiri base in Mapanzure by the Rhodesian forces as retribution for his support of the combatants. In an exchange between the spirit of Chivhanga and some of the surviving combatants, it emerges that the voice of the dead chief cries out to have its body identified. The spiritual voice remembers its human brothers, 'Soromoni naJabhusoni' (NDDM, 55), and advises the surviving combatants to be in touch with these two people so as to lead villagers to the spot where the body of Chief Chivhanga was dumped:

Surviving combatant: ‘Akakutorai nguvai mabhunu aya’? (‘What time did the Boers take you’?)

Possessed Woman: Mabhunu akanditora husiku a-a-a-a, akandisunga handichazive pandiri’. ‘The Boers (soldiers) took me at night and tied me and I don’t know where I am.’

Surviving combatant: ‘Aiwa tinokutorai mambo, saka imimi chichemo chenyu ndechekuti mutorwe muradzikwe zvakana nedzinza renyu’ (‘Anyway, we will take you, chief, so your wish is to be taken so that you are buried decently by your people.’)

Possessed Woman: Ndozvishuwiro hakuna chimwe, unoziva icho chinondisika ndichochine shungu wekuda kuwona mutumbi (That is the one only wish, you know the spiritual voice that possesses me is eager to see its body recovered (NDDM: 54).

In the dialogue above, which is extracted from NDDM (2015), a woman is possessed by the spirit of chief Chivhanga. First, here, a woman contradicts the age-old assumption that spirit possession was only the realm of male Mhondoros. Second, it is only through the agency of spirit possession that the possessed woman is able to direct the surviving ex combatants and the villagers to where the remains of Chief Chivhanga were left to rot by the Rhodesian soldiers. Third, the spiritual voice makes it clear that its wish is for the bones of Chief Chivhanga to be recovered and decently buried by its blood relatives identified as ‘Soromoni and naJabhusoni’ (Solomon and Jabson’) (NDDM, 2015:55) who are said to be alive and in Chipinge district in the east of Zimbabwe.

In the rural area of Chibondo in Mount Darwin, in the northern part of Zimbabwe, another possessed woman bemoans the fact that the remains of combatant has not been offered decent burial. According to the spirit of the possessed woman, many of the surviving combatants, both in and outside post-independence government, seem not to care about the whereabouts of this combatants who disappeared and whose remains have not been located and identified. (NDDM, 86). One of the concerns raised by the spiritual voice is that it has been many years since they died and no one seems to care. The spiritual voice requests the surviving combatant to show remorse and

camaraderie with those who died presumably for the same cause, namely, to liberate Zimbabwe from the clutches of colonial rule. The spiritual voice lashes out at surviving combatants: 'Titoreiwo mutichengetedzewo makore mangani makasununguka muchigara zvakanaka'. (Take us and accord us decent burial. How many years have gone by while we are dead and while you are free and yet you are living comfortably enjoying what we fought for) (NDDM, 2015: 87). Official amnesia is attacked by the spiritual voice of the dead combatant. In the Chesa area in Mount Darwin another possessed woman indicate that the dead combatant that possessed the woman died in Ruwombwe in the rural area in Mutare, near the eastern border with Mozambique, and that there were other dead comrades who had not yet manifested themselves (NDDM, 2015: 147). Although another dead combatant had died in the rural area of Rushinga, the spirit manifested in the Chesa rural area in Mount Darwin where some burials of combatants were taking place. This occasion enabled the reburial committee to go to Rushinga rural area to identify the dead combatant. In the Guruve rural area in north-west of Zimbabwe, the possessing spirit of a dead combatant justified possessing children in its belief that this would make the surviving guerrillas take the spirit voices of dead combatants seriously. In the words of the spirit of the dead combatant,

Chandaisvikira pamwana, ndakaona kuti ndikabuda pamunhu mukuru kudai, anhu, anoramba, ndosaka ndaakubudira pamwana apa' (Why I possessed the child is because I saw that if I possessed an old person, the villagers and surviving guerrillas/combatants would refuse to heed my call, that is why I manifested myself in death through a child (NDDM, 2015: 316).

From the rural area of Chimoio in Mozambique, the spirit of Grace Chimurenga manifested itself and linked her death to one woman called Monica who sold out the combatants to the Rhodesian forces. Unlike most spiritual voices whose stories appear in NDDM, the spirit of Grace Chimurenga wanted retributive justice. The spirit wanted Monica to tell the community where she had buried the bodies of the deceased combatants. The spiritual voice of the dead combatant, Grace Chimurenga, also wanted Monica to take Grace Chimurenga's bones to her parents. In the absence of official forensic scientists, the spirits led the living to identify the spot where the combatants that included Grace Chimurenga were killed and buried. In this

instance, the agency of the spiritual voice of Grace Chimurenga used the cultural institution of spirit possession to communicate the whereabouts of Grace Chimurenga's remains. Spirit possession is utilised here as an alternative mode of arriving at a kind of human knowledge that the surviving combatants and villagers did not possess. In other words, the modernity of spirit possession as an African indigenous knowledge system is that the institution is capable of leading the living to arrive at cultural/political truths. Considered from this perspective, spirit possession is a self-validating knowledge system even though living witnesses also corroborate its truths.

The spiritual voices of dead combatants manifested themselves as new ancestors of a long tradition of clan mediumistic cultures (Lan, 1985, Shoko, 2006). The same spiritual voices of dead are a recent phenomenon of 'spontaneous [post] war-mediumship' (Fontein, 2006: 171) using children and youth as its agency. In Zimbabwean cultural history, the spirit possession is not a new phenomenon. Spirit possession manifested itself as political institution to reckon with through a woman called Charwe who was possessed by the spirit of Nehanda and who resisted colonialism between 1890 and 1889 when the country of Zimbabwe was being invaded by British colonists. Although Charwe was hanged by the British settlers in 1898, the spirit of Nehanda uttered through its host, Charwe, that her bones would in due course rise to fight white settlerism in Rhodesia. And the bones rose in the form of the African nationalist forces that came together to fight white settlerism in Zimbabwe in the liberation struggle called the Second Chimurenga in the 1970s. In the discursive narratives authorised by spirit possession, politics, religion and African philosophy, the 'living dead' can manifest themselves and intercede in human affairs to advise the living on certain cultural and political issues. In oral narratives published in NDDM, (2015) the spiritual voices of dead combatants and non-combatants were not called upon to reveal themselves; the spiritual voices re-entered the public sphere of humans in ways that generated knowledge that shows that the dead combatants could still rise and manifest their agency in a manner that introduces different agendas in post independent Zimbabwe.

## **Reburial, Mourning the Dead and the Myth of Eternal Return**

Spirit possessions that led to identifications of dead combatants and subse-

quently facilitated reburials of dead combatants also revealed existential themes such as the need for decent burial amongst one's own people. This demand by the spirits is a constant refrain in almost all the rural areas mentioned in the oral stories contained in NDDM (2015). For example, in the Chipinge district in Eastern Zimbabwe, the spiritual voices of dead combatants that possessed youths and guerrillas wished to have a decent reburial. One of the dead combatants said:

Tichiri kusango namanje tichirikungotambura...Isu vamwe torambatchingotambura chete taakuda kuti tichigadzikanawo zvakanaka. Imi makakunda mukararama mogadzikanawo. 'Zvakanaka kuti mukwanisewo kutichengetedzawo isusu takasara handiti...'.(We are still in the forest up to now. We are suffering. We continue to suffer but now we want to be united by our families and have stability in the community. It is good that the surviving people be able to re-bury the remains of the combatants of those who remained in the forest, isn't it so') (NDDM: 1)

The request made above suggests a certain uneasiness that spiritual voices feel, namely that they seem to have been rejected by their own people for as long as their remains continue to be scattered 'kusango' or in the forest. The voices of the dead combatants want their families to know where they are. In rural area of Nyazura, in the eastern part of Zimbabwe, one manifesting spirit of the dead combatant said that its aim for revealing itself was to be assisted to go back to its home where the dead combatant had left parents when she/he went to fight Ian Smith, the Rhodesian Prime Minister. In another area called Rusape Gutu in eastern Zimbabwe, 'the remains of Comrade Black Hood were taken to Gutu and were received by relatives and friends in his homeland' (NDDM: 241). Other dead combatants, identified and reburied amongst their families in Masvingo province in the south west of Zimbabwe were Constain Tutai Kudakwashe, Thomas Dambari, and Genetsai Vitori from Chiredzi (ibid: 242). In the Gwanda district in Matabeleland South in Zimbabwe, the local leadership witnessed scattered bones of Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) freedom fighters and requested the government to assist with funds to locate the families and villages from which the combatants had come. In the Guruve area, in the north-west part of

Zimbabwe, the spirits of dead combatants said they were happy that they were going to their homes and people.

From the above statements by spiritual voices of dead combatants, it becomes pertinent to suggest that within the discourses of spirit possession, reburial of dead bodies confirms that somebody once existed. It allows the community to bring the spirit of the dead back into the pantheon of family, community and nation's ancestors. And as Shoko (2006) points out, in Shona culture in particular and African traditions in general, reburials of bones that relatives of the deceased can see, re-sacralises the political order which derives legitimacy from the biographies of the dead. In Zimbabwe, the 11th of August of each year is celebrated as the Heroes day. But the heroes often remembered are those who are surviving and those who are dead but which the government can account for. This leaves out recognition of the role played by the dead combatants whose whereabouts cannot be ascertained. According to Blaauw and Lahteenmaki (2002:771),

Many of the disappeared persons have been breadwinners and their families have faced a loss of income. Where there is no official acknowledgment of the missing person's status, the family might not be given the support that members normally receive in cases of death.

In other words, the dead combatants that the state does not remember 'lose' out because the families of the disappeared do not receive monthly gratuities. This causes 'arrested grief or atypical reactions' (ibid: 771) as was expressed by the spirits of the dead combatants.

But if we take spirit possession as a rhetorical way of remembering combatants lying in unmarked graves, then it is arguable that spirit possession ensures that the voices of the dead combatants are assured a place among the living and the dead through spiritual manifestation. Through spirit possession, scientific evidence of crimes of genocide are uncovered and, after documentation, this knowledge should be used to prosecute and prevent crimes in future. Reburials of dead combatants aided by spirit possession can bring some form of closure through memorialisation.

Reburial of the remains of dead combatants in Zimbabwe also centres on the concept of mourning so important in African communities. Spirit possession tackled the problem of 'unresolved mourning' (CSVR 2005: 16) because it confirmed that dead guerrilla in unknown graves constitute loss to

communal and individual lives. By manifesting their voices through possession of the youth and ex-combatants, the previously unacknowledged dead combatants insisted that their lives are grievable. Butler (2006:20) states that although it is not entirely known 'when mourning is successful, or when one has fully mourned another human being', mourning dead combatants during ceremonies of reburials is 'another way of imagining community' (ibid, 27) because human beings 'as bodies outside ourselves [are] for one another' (ibid). These views on the importance of mourning dead combatants through reburials are acknowledged in Burnet's (2012) study of the Rwandan genocide in which national mourning is viewed as another way of resisting silence by remembering. But Burnet (2012:93) warns that amnesia can be promoted through

Nationalised mourning [that] minimizes and even denies the multiplicity of truths about the genocide. Nationalised mourning poses difficulties for genocide survivors who find that the dominant discourses do not fit with their own experiences... While attempting to forge a new, unified national identity around a single understanding of the genocide and a single version of history, national mourning homogenizes the diverse experiences of victims of the genocide, the civil war, and afterward. In this way, individual mourning becomes political and managed by the state.

This account of the paradox of mourning that Burnet found in Rwanda also is apparent in post-independent Zimbabwe. To begin with, the fact alone that there were voices of dead combatants that erupted from unmarked graves in the bowels of earth, and other voices emerging from scattered bones of dead combatants, complicates the official narrative of a definite political closure. That dead combatants had to possess unsuspecting youth, many of whom did not go to war, is another form of resisting being forgotten. And the dead combatants' narratives of national healing that manifested through spirit possession sometimes brought officially sanctioned political narratives of the state into crisis. This happens in the section discussed below where the nationalist narrative that insists on describing former Rhodesian whites as the enemy of African people in post-independence Zimbabwe ruled by black elites is questioned by the voices of dead combatants.

## **Cleansing, Communal Reconciliation and the Paradox of National Healing in Zimbabwe**

So far, I have argued that within the discourses of spirit possession, identifying bones of dead combatants and non-combatants in the war, the process of reburials and mourning can by themselves assure or foster a certain degree of unity amongst the spirits of the dead and the spirits of the living. It is therefore true, as Shoko states, that ‘reburial activities reflect Zimbabwe’s appropriation of religion into political discourse’ (Shoko 2006: 1) especially when linked to the land question. One might argue further that politics associated with visible movements are sometimes absorbed and critiqued in the cultural practices of spirit possession. The everyday lives of people who believe in spirit possession are mundane; the dead and the living like to be respected. In other words, there are other contexts which are not political in their manifestations through millennia movements, but are political in the implications of how they shape, order and articulate themselves in the cultural lives of people. Spirit possession as an African indigenous knowledge system also lends itself to interpretation in alternative ways, namely, the ways in which the very ideas that people have about communal healing and reconciliation are questioned. In my research, the complex orders of spirit possession were manifested through underlying paradoxes of national and communal healing between the spirits of the dead combatants and non-combatants in post independent Zimbabwe. However, spirit possession also complicates the notion of a single collective black identity with a unitary vision of post war society.

In the rural area of Buhera, the spirit of a dead combatant manifested through his son. Other spiritual voices of dead combatants continued to struggle to be heard but no one would recognise them (NDDM, 2015: 274-5). This view is supported by Jimmy Motsi, a surviving combatant and witness of death of some combatants. Jimmy Motsi commented that in rural area of Chesa in Mount Darwin, national healing between the dead combatants and the villagers had to begin with the recognition of all the dead who perished fighting for independence, whether these were armed combatants or the ordinary people who provided the material and human resources to the liberation forces. For Jimmy Motsi, ‘Yamava kuti national healing ingatangire kupi national healing, ini ndinoti ava ndivo vanhu vanofanira kutangwa ne national healing’ (What you are calling national healing, where would it begin? I say these dead combatants and villagers and the people who should be addressed by national

healing (NDDM, 2015: 139). In the area of Mount Darwin, north of Zimbabwe, the children born and left by the dead combatants while they were fighting in the liberation struggle were introduced to their unfamiliar relatives. However, readjusting to this new reality of family reconciliation was a problem for both the children and the families. The spiritual voice of Comrade Bruce manifested and told villagers that its actual name was of Eswath Chipazi who was killed and buried in the veld. Jimmy Motsi, one of the surviving combatants confirmed to the relatives of Comrade Bruce saying:

Eswath, ambuya akadanana nemusikana muhondo, adanana nemusikana muhondo, akaita mwana, saka mwana wacho aripano' (Grandmother, Eswath fell in love with a lady during the war and the relationship resulted with a child born, and the child of the dead combatant is here present at the reburial of his father's remains) (NDDM, 2015:116).

In this statement, African cultural belief systems triumph over some ideologies which emphasised that combatants should not co-habit with women during the war. It is through spirit possession that Comrade Bruce's lineage is reasserted and kept alive. But the irony is that this narrative of surviving children of dead combatants does not sit well with post-colonial leaders who are too eager to forget the war, and the children that war brought back into the lives of people who had psychologically 'settled' many years with the belief that their loved ones were indeed dead for good.

In NDDM (2015), some narratives by surviving combatants mentioned that the new black government was not eager to assist the children and young men who were being possessed by the spirits of dead combatants. One surviving combatant, Anna Garikai, bemoaned the fact that the government was half-hearted in its participation in the reburials of dead combatants lying in unmarked graves. She implored that:

Chirongwa chedu kubva zvatachitanga chirikufamba zvakanaka kusvika parizvino ma Comrades atkwanisa kufukunura a 1025 asi nyaya iripo inogonetsa pachirongwa chedu, ndeyekuti hatisati tawana rutsigiro rwakakwana kubva kuhurumende yedu toti vana ava vakaenda kuhondo...tinenge tichifunga kuti izvi zvinhu zvinofanirwa kunge zvichiitwa neHurumende yedu kuti tikwanise kunge tichiviga

vana vese vakasara mumasango tivavige zvakanaka kumisha yavo pakarara madzibaba avo...Dai Hurumende yedu yatinzwisisa yapindira yabatsira nezvekufambisa kubatsirawo nezvekudya yabatsirawo nemacoffins ekuisira vakafa yangatora chironywa ichi yachiita chayoo..? (Our program, since we begun is going on well until now we have exhumed 1025 comrades but the real story/issue which is there as a problem about this program is that we have not received enough support from the government to assist children who went to war. We will be thinking that things should be done by the government so that we are able to bury all the children (combatants) who were left behind in the forest, we should bury them in their own community where their forefathers are buried. I wish the government should understand, intervene and assist with food, and with coffins to put the remains of the combatants and make this program its own. (NDDM, 2015: 250-251)

Garikai also said many of the families of the deceased do not have money with which to honor their fallen sons and daughters through a decent burial. The question of noncommittal attitude of the government of the day to the reburials was also echoed in the area of Buhera by one surviving witness who said that the guerrillas assisting in reburials have had no respite since they are continuing to fight a war to recover their comrades (NDDM, 273). The possessed youths who were deprived of school attendance while they were attending reburial sessions have also not been looked after by the government. Many youths had left school and would walk with guerrillas exhuming the dead combatants. In Mount Darwin, village elders such as Sabhukus, were happy that dead combatants had left surviving children, but the elders quickly pointed out that the state needed to also look after these children orphaned by war (NDDM, 2015:127). In the area of Chipinge, eastern Zimbabwe, the spirit of Comrade Gary manifested itself, warning that the dead combatants do not want the country to slide into civil war:

Zvatirikuda ndezvekuti nyika haifaniri kuramba ichtambudzika. Hatisirikuda kuti nyika irambe ichidhonzeranwa zvekubatirana mabachi muhuro hatichada, tirikuda kuti tinyatsogara zvakadzikama zvatakafira (What we want is that the country should not keep on suffering. We do not like the country to continue in

conflict with people removing their jackets holding each other's throats, we want to live peacefully for which we died in the war (NDDM, 2015: 1).

In addition to wishing the country to move out of 'bare' (Agamben, 1998) living imposed by bad governance of the country, the spirit of Comrade Gary criticised the government for including many pythons - reference to people who did not participate in the struggle to run the structures of government. On one occasion, the spirit of the dead combatant acknowledges Robert Mugabe as the legitimate leader who derives his powers to rule from the efforts of the dead combatants:

VaMugabe tinovatsigira chaizvo. Tinovapa simba rakawanda. Musafunge kuti kuchembera kusvika paari paya kusimba kwake, hazvisi. Tinotovaka ipo paye. Mitswe inenge yatsemuka tinotinoma tichivitira kuti zvinhu zvfambe'(We support Mr Mugabe. We give him more power. Do not think being old where Mr Mugabe is, is because he is strong. We are there with him. When he feels weak, we repair it, defending him so that things move well') (NDDM, 2015:7).

On another occasion the spiritual voices at Mwandeka, in Mount Darwin introduce what one might describe as a discordant political narrative of the heroism of Ndabaningi Sithole and the assumed necessity for Didymus Mutasa to take over the leadership of ZANU PF in Manicaland (NDDM, 2015: 47).

Put differently, the voices of the spirit of dead combatants introduce subversive narratives that the present government has hunted down and banished from national site. To the extent that the spirits of dead combatants buried in unmarked graves can authorise alternative political identities of the nation, this reveals the distinctive nature of spirit possession as a cultural institution that can produce knowledge that it validates in the face of other contesting narratives of the nation. While David et al (2014) believe that the Zimbabwe government has tended to sideline spirit possession and mediums in the post war period, Shoko (2006) states that the State has only shown interest in reburials of dead combatants in unmarked graves when officials want to manipulate guerrillas in the land reform programme so that what is memorialised is a partial and patriotic history (Ranger: 2007).

Other critics of reburials in Zimbabwe do not mince words as when

Blaauw and Lahteenmaki openly suggest that the levels of denial, silence and refusal to acknowledge or disclose the role of guerrillas or non-guerrillas in nation-building is manifested in the fear instilled in the people in whose name the war was fought, since, according to the scholars, ‘In Zimbabwe, funerals of people killed during political unrest often take place in secret, involving only a few family members’ (2002, 774). These critical views are echoed by the spirit of comrade Gary from Chipinge that openly attacked the government for promoting a narrow ethnic agenda following the succession battles which intensified in 2014 within ZANU PF and resulted in the political axing of Joyce Mujuru and Didymus Mutasa, both former ZANU PF senior politicians. Spirits of dead combatants point out that national healing and reconciliation are difficult to achieve partly because of the government’s negative attitude towards the spirit of dead combatants in unmarked graves. Because these spirits are not yet known, they exist in a grey or liminal space that the government cannot entirely control. The narratives authorised from these spiritual voices provide evidence of a different kind of archive of knowledge which does not necessarily correspond to what official narratives of political correctness would want all Zimbabweans to affirm.

But more dramatic complications of national healing and reconciliation arise from unresolved issues of betrayal within African communities which the spirits of dead combatants manifested. In Rusape, one witness at the reburials confirmed that a man named Chigabe (NDDM: 202), was responsible for the death of several guerrillas and non-guerrillas as he worked with the Rhodesian forces. Such revelations confirm the difficulties of thinking of the liberation struggle as moved by people with a single vision. Sellouts who caused the deaths of people still live in the same communities with their relatives: and this often heightens tensions within the communities. These tensions manifest in different ways.

This article has already mentioned the killer of Comrade Chimurenga. Her killer, one Monica, was supposed to take Chimurenga’s bones to her family. The possibility that disharmony could be continued in the lives of the community in post war Zimbabwe is signalled when Chimurenga says that:

Ndoda kuti vabereki vangu vazive kuti uyu ndiye muvengi wangu. Ehe zve ndoda kuti muvengi wangu, andichere nekuti ndiye ari kuziva paakandiisa.... Achanditakura ipapo, ndiye, kusvika kumusha kwedu, nemota isina kana hwindo. Handidi futi kupinda mubokisi ndichibva

uku dakuenda ndiri mujira, rake raachatenga iye Monica nemari yake (I want my parents to know it is the enemy. I also want my enemy to exhume me because she alone knows where she buried me. She will carry me from there until I get to my home using a car without a window. I do not want to be put in a coffin, I want to go wrapped in cloth that she will have bought using her own money (NDDM, 2015: 361)

Spirits of dead combatants who believed they were wronged and whose death was caused by fellow Africans, could seek retribution as a form of justice. The spiritual voice of the dead Grace Chimurenga wishes that, as punishment, Monica should submit herself to the parents of the dead guerrilla. In other words, through spirit possession, notions of restorative justice are negotiated. But as Blaauw and Lahteenmaki (2002) argue, when the disappeared or dead combatants are denied a place among the living and also denied a place among the dead, this results in arrested grief and the spirits of the dead combatants can become angry, restless and vengeful. The institution of spirit possession, when viewed as another way of arriving at the moral economy of an alternative knowledge system, does challenge some assumptions of the so-called mainstream knowledge. Spirit possession authorises new ways of translating knowing into telling: in the process, it assists in resolving community and national problems. This understanding of spirit possession credits it with the capacity to handle conflicting values in a community. One therefore is forced to refute Craffet's (2015) view of possession as a demonic manifestation of a neurological disease for which exorcism is the solution, or Keener's (2010) linking of possession to 'self-destructive behaviour of possessed persons [mentioned] in Mark 5:5 and 9:22'(216).

### **Spiritual Voices as Cultural Critique of Politics of Official Betrayal and Selective Mourning in NDDM**

The immediate aim of the manifestations of the spiritual voices of dead combatants and non-combatants was the need to have remains of guerrillas identified, recovered and buried with decency among their relatives. The spiritual voices of combatants and non-combatants also possessed children,

youths, and surviving combatants in order to authorize a discourse of family, community and national reconciliation between and among families that may have been at opposed political camps during the liberation struggle. However, in a post-colonial Zimbabwean context in which the political structures of the ruling party are becoming increasingly authoritarian and anti-pluralistic and where the democratic spaces are fast shrinking, the spiritual voices of the dead combatants and non-combatants manifest themselves and represent themselves as the new subalterns with alternative views about the potential future development of the country. In NDDM (2015) some surviving combatants who witnessed the death of their comrades believe that the killing of combatants and non-combatants by the Rhodesian war machinery amounted to genocide. Hapison Muchechetere believes that genocide was committed in Rhodesia by the Smith regime [and] by the settler farmers (NDDM, 2015: 110). The ex-combatant is supported by the Chairperson of Fallen Heroes Trust who also pointed at the mass killings of ordinary people in Rusape, a small town in the east of Zimbabwe (NDDM, 2015: 190-192). Both the spiritual voices and the surviving combatants believe that the post-colonial government has never held to account the perpetrators of genocide that caused the death of combatants and innocent ordinary people. The post-colonial government is also blamed for fomenting ethnic tensions in post independence Zimbabwe. Some voices of the dead combatants in the area of Mwaneka in the district of Chipinge in eastern Zimbabwe believe that the Manyika ethnic group is being sidelined from occupying important political posts in a black government perceived to be dominated by the Zezuru clan (NDDM, 2015: 47). Furthermore, some reporters and commentators who worked closely with the surviving combatants and villagers to offer decent burial to remains of dead combatants, also believe that the government is noncommittal about assisting in accelerating the program of reburial of dead combatants and non-combatants who have not been found and given decent burials. The fact that the spiritual voices of dead fighters and non-fighters have had to manifest of their own accord suggests that there are other narratives of the war and peace, in post-independence Zimbabwe that have been suppressed by the ruling elites. Put in different words, spiritual voices of dead combatants and non-combatants project themselves as witness and archive. The corroborating voices of surviving combatants and non-combatants who do not form part of the mainstream politics of patronage of the ruling class, also indicate that there are narratives that are struggling to be heard. The agency of spirit possession of

children, youths and some combatants in suggesting alterity or alternative strategies of making Zimbabwe stable imply that there are forms of indigenous knowledge systems whose forms of rationalities leads to alternative politics in the Zimbabwean post-colony.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to explore the agency of the institutional practice of spirit possession in identifying unmarked graves of dead combatants for reburial. It was argued that the official number of fifty thousand African people who died in Zimbabwe's liberation war is far less than the reality on the ground. When spirits spoke from unmarked graves, they reversed our notion of writing history. The spirits' narratives countermanded official narratives of dead guerrillas authorised by surviving guerrillas and professional historians. To this extent, as an institution of memory, spirit possession provides an alternative speaking position. What was spoken from this privileged position of alterity and otherness confirmed as well as critiqued mainstream narratives on war and peace. Spirits of dead combatants openly named their pain and how they died as a result of genocidal violence unlike official accounts that describe the war as a civil conflict. The article revealed that reburials reunited dead combatants with their families and communities and ensured that the dead were accepted by the living into the pantheon of African ancestors based on their biographies as war heroes and heroines. Reburial also allowed the living to mourn their dead loved ones. Mourning the dead has a transformative effect in that it allows the living to reflect on reasons for which their sons and daughters died fighting in the war. Reburial of fallen heroes also revealed that not all who died were guerrillas; ordinary Africans were also killed and this point deconstructs the culture of entitlement that the living guerrillas insist on when dealing with ordinary people in post independent Zimbabwe. Spirits of dead combatants manifested through young men, and women and critiqued the government for turning their sacrifice into a culture of corruption.

The fact that the spirits spoke from the bowels of the earth means their narratives were not patrolled by the government. It was possible for the spirits to re-introduce alternative political narratives that had been expunged from public view by the state. However, like any other knowledge system, spirit possession reflected chasms in the meanings of community and national

healing and reconciliation. Part of the problem that the spirits manifested is that most of the people who sold out guerrillas to the enemy have captured the postcolonial state and are ruling today. In some rural villages in Zimbabwe, some ordinary people who led guerrillas to their death are still surviving and living in the same space with families of dead combatants. Suspicion and anger is still prevalent in the spirit world and this often manifests in the social tensions in the African communities. Sometimes cleansing processes have had to be carried out by spirit mediums to reconcile the past of violence and the presence of continued violence. The spiritual voices also criticised the post-colonial government for its slow and non-committal attitude towards reclaiming the remains of the dead combatants and non-combatants so as to provide the remains of the dead with decent burials amongst their relatives.

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