

**GOVERNMENT- INITIATED RECONCILIATION STRATEGIES VERSUS
COMMUNITY- BASED INITIATIVES: VOICES FROM THE LIBERATION WAR
VETERANS OF ZIMBABWE**

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ABSTRACT

Since Zimbabwe's independence in 1980, state pronounced reconciliation did not permeate down to those who had fought during the war. Those who had fought as guerillas believed that the policy of reconciliation coming from the then Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe was meant to sober relations between the formerly oppressed blacks and the whites. The government was too far to help them to pay for the transgressions which they had committed during the war and to cleanse them of the very act of blood-letting in the war. To ensure that they were socially acceptable as returnees from the war, they underwent rituals whether traditional or Christian. Families which they were rejoining also had the obligation to undertake these rituals on behalf of their returning sons and daughters for the good of the family and the combatants in particular. The study was undertaken in the small town of Chinhoyi with a view of eliciting voices from ex-combatants in terms of their perceptions of reconciliation. The study argues that reconciliation from above is often interpreted as elitist by the ordinary people who then resort to their own locally based initiatives. Furthermore, the research informs current efforts by the Zimbabwe Government of National Unity towards national reconciliation and integration.

INTRODUCTION

War is as old as states and societies. It is largely because of wars that states have risen as others have also disappeared. Taken in this context families and communities often quarrel over issues such as betrayal of each other, unfair treatment of relatives, and use of witchcraft, conniving with the enemy or some other crimes which can be committed during such times of political instability. That being the case, societies traditionally and to date, embrace reconciliation and integration as a mechanism of suturing war inflicted injuries since war is also interpreted as a time of abnormality. Thus the Zimbabwe African National Union of the Patriotic Front (ZANU PF)-led Government at independence in 1980 pronounced the gospel

of reconciliation through the then Prime Minister Robert Mugabe. Members of the white community and others especially those responsible for atrocities against Africans were astounded by this gesture and began unpacking their bags in anticipation of better relations. Genuine and permanent reconciliation was foiled by tense relations between Patriotic Front of the Zimbabwe African People' Union (PF ZAPU) and ZANU (PF), the failure of the white community to embrace the policy led them to join the opposition political party that is the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) which was formed in 1999. This paradigm shift made the government to be preoccupied with security issues at the expense of reconciliation. At the same time, 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 guerillas or their collaborators. These had to make private arrangements at family level to deal with avenging spirits. Welcoming returning sons and daughters, interrogating and cleansing them became family and sometimes community obligations. Pentecostal churches were also actively involved.

This paper begins by examining working definition of reconciliation so that the need for national programmes to attain permanent healing is appreciated. It also focuses on the African concept of the spiritual world and then assesses how ancient and pre-colonial societies have attempted to resolve explosive issues at the end of conflicts. The paper re-emphasises the centrality of religion to the war of liberation in order to inform ongoing processes by the Government of National Unity on the importance of religion as a pivotal therapeutic tool for a total reconciliation. Lastly, conclusions are drawn to assist academics and policy makers about the need for grassroots-based reconciliation for the 21st Century Zimbabwe which has gone through violent moments especially during election times.

Theoretical Framework

It is only when violence comes to a halt that society can begin the process of constructing non-violent relations between previously antagonistic groups. Staub (2006:87) defines reconciliation as a mutual acceptance of each other by groups whose psychological orientation has changed through forgiveness. Victims and perpetrators start to see the past as shaping the future by establishing constructive relationships.

Methodology

Information on the role of religion during the liberation war was mainly drawn from former Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) guerillas and also Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA). These veterans came from different parts of

Zimbabwe and some of them are now resident in Chinhoyi. During the interviews, liberation war veterans discussed their expectations at independence including what they thought should have been done to fully integrate them.

Snowball sampling was useful in linking up with these veterans. They sometimes referred questions asked to their colleagues in the neighborhood. Researchers did not go through the usual war veterans' structures owing to limited time and also out of fear of getting structured information.

The African Concept Of The Spiritual World

According to Bourdillon (1982:217), the African people particularly the Shona believe in the existence of spirits. The most important one is regarded as a guardian spirit. In most cases after death the spirit of the dead is settled through rituals and it is given a medium through who from time to time communicates with the living. This spirit is highly respected through beer, shrines and so on. It continues to bear influence on the community. Taken in this way the Zimbabwean war of liberation and the subsequent process of reconciliation and integration was to be understood within a cultural context.

Pre-Colonial War Cleansing Rituals

In the war, warriors enter into an unnatural or altered state. According to Ehrenreich (2011:10), the man or boy leaves his former self and becomes something totally different and perhaps taking up a new name. In traditional societies, such a change was accompanied by ritual drumming, dancing, feasting and sexual abstinence. As a mechanism of discontinuity, the warrior was supposed to leave his humanness behind and assume a new form as an animal. She writes about the Scandinavian society where a man became a bear first (dressed in a bear hide) who went chasing and biting people before recognised as an elite warrior while the Irish monster transformed himself into a monster when preparing for a battle. The transformation was further assisted by drugs or social pressures and other intoxicants. Today, warriors are transformed through endless marches, drills and the use of firearms. Therefore, after the war cleansing rituals were performed to return the warriors back to their normal lives.

The idea here is not to present the liberation war in Zimbabwe as a wholesale religious movement because it was not. However, the prevalence of a strong belief in the afterlife by both Christians and traditionalists means that some form of religious ceremonies could have done something to help fighters who were in an unnatural state during the course of the liberation war. Participation in war licensed combatants to kill, loot, burn and sometimes

even rape opponents. Even if some participants may not have done all that, the challenge remains that they were in an abnormal state. As such, it would not be an overstatement to emphasise the need for well-programmed approach to reconciliation. Otherwise, if the process had been properly undertaken at independence recurring episodes of political violence might have been prevented. Keeley (1996: 144) noted that returning warriors often went through ritual before they were allowed to celebrate victory or rejoin the community for example covering their heads, vomiting and abstaining from sex. Among the Maori, returning warriors could not participate in the victory celebration until they had gone through the whaka-hoa ceremony which was deliberately designed to make warriors common again. Similarly, among the Taulipang Indians of South America, victorious warriors set on ants and passed a cord covered with poisonous ants through their mouths and noses.

Spirit Mediums And Mass Nationalism

The role of spirit mediums dates back to the 1896-7 uprisings in Matabeleland and Mashonaland respectively. Thus, the tradition of the spirit mediums, who had participated effectively in the First Chimurenga War was still alive in the 1970s hence the new generation of mediums was equally opposed to the Whites and their colonial oppressive system (Bhebe and Ranger.1995:9). Therefore the participation of spirit mediums in the liberation struggle has a long history. The spirit of Nehanda continued to play a significant role in mass mobilisation in the Dande area of Mt Darwin Mhanda (2011:102) further alludes that a number of spirit mediums accompanied the spirit of Nehanda to Mboroma and Chifombo in Zambia with a number of guerilla recruits.

In essence, the mega duties of spirit mediums evolved round the recruitment exercise, mobilisation of support for the freedom fighters as well as giving spiritual guidance Mhanda (2011:67). In political terms, this would entail protection against the enemy, prescription of war strategies and the preservation of traditional norms. Fay Chung (2006:195) is of the same view that simple adherence to ethical rules such as respect for life, sexual purity, care of the environment were paramount in the smooth execution of the war of liberation in Zimbabwe. It was believed that those who bent the rules in their favor would be punished by the spirits. Therefore spirit mediums were involved in the recruitment exercise and safe movement of guerillas from one point to another. Thus, the guerrillas and African Traditional Religions were inseparable.

Nationalists during this period regard great historical signs of human history of the hills as important heritage sites. For instance, Rhodes's grave and Mzilikazi's tomb at Entumbane

had often been coupled together by the Ndebele cultural nationalists. However, this changed in radical nationalists' rhetoric which viewed Rhode's grave as a sign of conquest and alienation while Entumbane became a symbol not only of the Ndebele but also of African national independence Ranger (1999:209). Thus, the challenges of military integration facing the country after independence was possibly as a result of this philosophy. Infact, the guerrillas were initially opposed to the policy of reconciliation and worse still further training by British instructors though they later on succumbed Kriger (2003:104). In this regard, reconciliation was viewed as coming from above hence it was elitist in nature since it sidelined the voices from the war veterans.

The Spiritual World In Refugee Camps

The role of the spirit mediums did not end in the mobilisation phase but continued outside Zimbabwe. They even followed the guerrillas into countries such as Mozambique and Zambia. Chung (2006:194) posits that the role of the traditional religious leaders during the armed struggle was to provide spiritual and ideological leadership. It should be noted that in both refugee and military camps, the spirit mediums had their own separate encampment where they practised their religion. This idea is confirmed by Mhanda (2011:67) who cites an incident at Chifombo camp in Zambia where the guerillas were food poisoned and the leadership consulted the spirit of Sekuru Chidyamauyu who in a trance assured no loss of life. He further remarked that this was an attempt by the Rhodesian agent to wipe out the ZANLA guerillas. Furthermore it stands to reason that spirit mediums were independent from the political leadership and hence were free to support or to criticise the political incumbents Chung (2006:195). As a result they had a profound effect on the day to day business of the liberation struggle. However, in some cases this made them unpopular with leaders who were found on the wrong end of ethical rules particularly on sexual purity.

Spirit Mediums and the Liberation Struggle in Zimbabwe

On the battle front in Southern Rhodesia now Zimbabwe, the guerillas continued to seek guidance and protection from the spirit mediums within the country. The interviewee, Joel Nyashanu (2012), whose Chimurenga name was Samora Machel, strongly believed that the war of liberation would not have been successful without the involvement of the living dead. He believed that passage to safety was often availed to the guerillas when cornered by the enemy. In his narratives, normally wild animals like the buck, lion and so on would normally come by and lead the freedom fighters to safety. Furthermore, it was quite common among the guerillas that the appearance of the black eagle usually signified imminent danger. Thus

Chung (2006:195) posits that one of the key tenets of traditional religion in Zimbabwe was the belief that the ancestral spirits protected their offspring and would guarantee their welfare, but provided that the living kept to the rules of their ancestors as mentioned earlier. It should also be noted that some of the freedom fighters were both guerillas and spirit mediums, hence were in a better position to guide the struggle and this was usually complimented with the support of the peasants. Kriger (1992:116) views peasants as being central to the success of the liberation struggle. However, he asserts that the unfortunate part is that ironically the direct voices of villagers are missing in most accounts of the revolutionary events in which they played an important role. Here Kriger seems to be only concerned with the reconciliation and integration of the living without taking into consideration the role played by the living dead.

During the liberation struggle the spirit mediums condemned the killing of political opponents and this is why reconciliation between blacks and whites at the end of the war was relatively free from bloodshed Chung (2006:198). Similarly, after having acknowledged the role of spirit mediums in the liberation struggle Chung failed to focus on the need for reconciliation and re-integration of the living and the spiritual world.

The Forgotten Pieces Of A Puzzle

Immediately after the liberation war veterans were concerned with cleansing themselves of the very act of having participated in the war. Information from interviewees reflects that government pronouncements were only important if it had monetary benefits. Comrade Mabhunu from Karoi said that as soon as he returned from the war, traditional beer was brewed and family friends and relatives were invited. In the morning before friends and distant relatives had arrived, a traditional healer (n'anga) was invited to find out if ancestors had been offended or if the returnee had brought any ngozi (angered spirits) into the family. In addition, a concoction of traditional medicine was administered on the veteran for the mere reason that he had seen the spilling of blood which is something disapproved by the spirits. Mabhunu was made to sit at the centre in a thatched hut as medicine was being administered. He was only wearing short trousers. Traditional beer was also poured on his head by gathered close relatives. Thereafter, feasting went on and Mabhunu had become fully integrated. Surprisingly, most of the oral informants did not openly admit to have killed someone during the war. The trend was for them to claim that other guerillas or mujibhas (male informers to freedom fighters) had killed civilians. If the trend is that no guerrilla killed a civilian, then one would wonder who actually killed whom.

Reynolds claims that after the war, n'angas he interviewed said that there were more cases of madness than before. The major causes were that so many spirits of people who had not been given decent burials or whose deaths resulted from acts of wrong-doing remained unsettled. On returning from the war men and women who had fought on either side of the quarrel visited traditional healers to be cleansed. This was important to both individuals and communities. N'angas acted like priests who were supposed to listen to people's confessions without divulging any of that sensitive information. Thus people were free to tell a n'anga if they had killed anyone in the war or wronged the spirits in any way. Cleansing would only become effective if the truth is revealed to the n'anga by the client. The traditional healer would then advise the client on what compensation was to be paid, how and to whom. Unless compensation is paid, trouble would persist. Like any other illness, recovery would follow once compensation is paid.

During the war of liberation, some of both the Rhodesian army and the guerillas shed the blood of innocent people, maimed, sexually abused women and committed other serious crimes against humanity. The spiritual world was totally against such practices right from the onset of the struggle. Thus, there was need for the returning war veterans to be traditionally cleansed as a way of reintegrating them into the society. It seems as if the nationalists' minds were pre-occupied with the reconciliation of only the living combatants probably this was because of the influence of western education which denigrates African religions. Furthermore, it was probably that reconciliation technocrats were not directly involved in actual fighting where African religion took a centre stage. This was different from the guerillas whose task was to fight and in doing so they were influenced by Maoism and the nationalists by the West since they were moulded in Europe. Taken in this context, it can be argued that differences in political consciousness continue up to this day Barry (2004:37). In fact the government was supposed to initiate reconciliation and integration at grassroots level through the involvement of the veterans, spiritual leaders and the entire peasant population in a national cleansing ceremony spearheaded by traditional leaders.

Mkono who fought in the eastern districts especially in Mutoko argued that he managed to return alive due to the protection he received from the spiritual world. Along with his two brothers who were also ZANLA guerillas, none of them perished in the war. According to him, if fighters followed the dos and don'ts of an area under which they were fighting, normally they would triumph over the enemy. The rules involved the already mentioned sexual abstinence, correct interpretation of animal and birds behaviours. Beer was brewed

on the basis that 'children' who had 'touched' blood could not automatically be admitted into the family without undergoing a cleansing ceremony. Therefore family members had an obligation to cleanse their children. According to him family initiatives were a result of the failure or unwillingness of guerilla commanders and their political leaders to lead the process as they had become overjoyed with independence euphoria. He thinks that a congress of spirit mediums should have been called to cleanse the children sent to fight the war. The failure to do so partly explains various psychological problems which former fighters are experiencing. The idea of calling for a congress of ancestral spirits is supported by the fact that in re-launching the war in July 1972, such a congress was called for in Chaminuka sector by a certain Mrs. Duwa McLaughlin (1998:240). Mediums from as far as Bindura attended and so were senior commanders who included, Joseph Chimurenga and Thomas Nhari. The same Mrs. Duwa was appointed by Karuwa to deal directly with ZANLA forces. This noble idea did not yield the desired results owing to lack of support from the nationalists. Since the war had been launched by spirit mediums it was also supposed to be rounded off by them with the guidance from the top leadership. Mkono explained that his colleagues are going through traumatic experiences because of the failure by their leadership. Community based reconciliation thus took a center-stage because of government failure to take up the initiative. A welcome home traditional ceremony at national level should be organized with the prime objective of reconciling former guerillas with themselves, their families and the nation at large.

Ironman Chikara, another guerrilla is now a lecturer at Great Zimbabwe University. He joined the war of liberation in 1977 and after training he operated in the Gaza area of Mozambique. According to him a lot of crimes were committed despite the fact that there was a prescribed code of conduct for the freedom fighters by the spirit mediums. In some cases they could carry the dead or the wounded during the war. As a result they were regarded as having been surrounded by the spirits of the dead. Hence after the war there was need for cleansing. However, upon reaching home his rituals were not done through the African traditional way despite his adherence to African tradition beliefs during the war. His parents were members of the Apostolic Faith Church of Zimbabwe. Upon his arrival an all night prayer was conducted by his parents. Central to this prayer was the quest for the Holy Spirit to chase away evil spirits which were believed to have afflicted the boy during the war. Thus his integration took the Christian route which heralded a new life for him. Bourdillon (1982:217) sums it by emphasising the sanctity of human life. If one kills directly or

indirectly cleansing is the only way for reacceptance into the family. If you Failure to do that then avenging spirits will always follow to torment the whole family. This ngozi will manifest itself in madness, alarming successive deaths, unexplained accidents and misfortunes which some of the war veterans are experiencing.

The other one who fought in Bikita and is now resident in Chinhoyi was one of the rare Zanla veterans to openly confess that he had killed people, armed or unarmed during the war of liberation. When he returned from war a ritual to cleanse him was undertaken. First there was an all night mbira ceremony at his parents' home and then at dawn he was taken to Nyamaunga River. Those who accompanied him included a n'anga, his parents, a family friend and a few other close relatives. Water and snuff were poured on his head to ward off evil spirits pursuing him in connection with wrong-doing in the war. The water and snuff which were washed away by the river were believed to have taken away the ngozi. Incisions or laceration with protective medicines were applied on him. He therefore did not need to compensate anyone as the ngozi had been chased away. This type of cleansing is normally considered incomplete because sometimes it only transfers the problem to other family members which means that trouble persists. Therefore, it can cause a lot of divisions within the family though momentarily that is not the case.

Without decent burial of those who had died in war, the integration process is still incomplete. As such, Sadomba claims that from 2000, spirit possessions affected many children in Manicaland with demands for reburial. To that effect, war veterans in Rushinga established an organization to undertake the reburials. Otherwise both the ruling ZANU-PF party and government had not taken up the issue seriously. This means that true healing on the part of family members comes when the dead are given a decent burial in a recognisable area.

In the same context, on the 5th of May 2011 a group of 700 people converged at Great Zimbabwe National Monuments (Mawere etal 2011:23). The majority were war veterans from Harare Province who demanded permission to carryout ritual cleansing of the psychological problems they were facing as a result of their war experiences. Furthermore, they indicated that they wanted guidance from the ancestors on how they could go to Mozambique to get the remains of the fallen heroes for a proper burial. Entrance to the site was mainly through the use of force since nobody from the local managers was willing to grant them permission. The group was led by Nehoreka, a popular national spirit medium who was known for performing rituals during the liberation struggle Mawere etal (2011. 23)

Upon asked why they had chosen this national site, some of the participants gave a number of reasons. Some asserted that the site was adopted as the residence of the country's ancestors. Thereby, confirming the same opinion given by Fontein (2006:47) who argues that Great Zimbabwe is highly regarded as a religious site particularly by the local clans of Mugabe and Nemanwa. During the liberation struggle, it was used as a source for motivation and inspiration. Upon the attainment of independence the country was named after the site. Furthermore, the new state drew a lot from the site in terms of its national symbols, for example the dollar coin, the ruling party's (ZANUPF) logo and the national flag Fontein (2006:99). Most of the war veterans expressed the same view as many politicians and historians on the significance of Great Zimbabwe monuments as a core of African traditional religion. In this context the idea of going to the site was understood to be a national event. To the majority of the war veterans, this was actually obnoxious and rather a sign of irresponsibility particularly when they perceived that the government was casting a blind eye on their call for rituals.

Related to the above issue, The Sunday News of (26. 08. 2012), reported that a group of 560 people mainly war veterans, 25 chiefs and 5 spirit mediums, all from Mashonaland region visited the Matopos National Park and performed a cleansing ritual on the shrine. The group had collected soil and human bones from Old Mkushi in Zambia to 'bring back' the spirits of deceased freedom fighters to Zimbabwe. Both the living and the spirits of the dead had to be cleansed. It was however noted that the ceremony attracted widespread condemnation from other traditional leaders and politicians from Matabeleland region who argued that by bringing human bones and soils onto the shrine was tantamount to disrespect for the areas' rites and beliefs. It was alleged that they exhibited high levels of arrogance and ancestors were therefore not happy hence the need to carry out another ritual ceremony to appease the ancestors.

Although this move was characterised by sour relations, the incident sheds more light on the unfinished business of reconciliation. The cry for proper individual human burial as opposed to mass grave approach is central to the whole conflict. The fallen war veterans and the living, both should go through a ritual cleansing if at all a proper reconciliation is to be realized.

Members of the police force and chiefs from Matabeleland South condemned the war veterans on the grounds that the shrines were only for rain -making ceremonies but not for cleansing rituals. Again it was alleged that the ritual was wrongly timed since the shrine

was already closed for any ceremonies according to their traditional calendar. Furthermore, the custodians of the site argued that ceremonies associated with reburial practices are usually conducted at heroes acres. The province is administratively structured therefore they had to follow proper procedures and seek permission especially from the local chiefs and spirit mediums. Moreover, one chief from Masvingo province alleged that at one point the people in question bathed naked in the presence of a female shrine keeper, and this was a desecration of the national shrine. It should however be noted that although there was a lot of controversy, the fact remains that these are manifestations for the need for a national ritual cleansing initiated by the communities through the approval of the Government.

CONCLUSION

The gospel of reconciliation in the world and Zimbabwe in particular is an area of great concern. The government of R G Mugabe made frantic efforts to establish national unity after a protracted war of liberation guided by the spirit of forgiving each other. Much was pursued for the war veterans particularly on the material side. However with the passage of time the intended benefits could not be meaningfully realized owing to challenges beyond the government's control. This was possibly attributed to the failure by the Government to take cognisance of the fact that conflict resolution and integration in pre-colonial African societies has been religious oriented. In the same vein it should be observed that spirit mediums were involved in mobilisation of cadres and also accompanied them into the neighboring states. Thus they continued to provide advice and guidance to the freedom fighters. In essence the nationalists, spirit mediums and the guerrillas were an inseparable entity which was bound by the fact that they had one common goal of driving off the British colonialists. However the dawning of independence has sidelined the once important role of spirit mediums. Thus presenting the post- independence Zimbabwean society as a puzzle with missing pieces in as far as the philosophy of reconciliation and integration is concerned.

The visit by war veterans to religious shrines such as Njelele, sporadic cases of spiritual possession among children and emerging issues of madness among the war veterans are clear indications of the ineffectiveness of the adopted reconciliation and integration from the above. Families which had cleansed their sons and daughters have brought sanity to their lives, whilst some individual war veterans had managed to do something, the majority of the war veterans continue to be traumatised by memories of their war experiences. Therefore there is need for the Government, war veterans and local communities to first expedite the reburial

programme and finally organise a national cleansing ceremony for the integration of fallen and living heroes with their spiritual world. In this way a fruitful reconciliation strategy can be realised.

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