



# Africa Spectrum

---

Mlambo, Alois S. (2013),  
Becoming Zimbabwe or Becoming Zimbabwean: Identity, Nationalism and State-  
building, in: *Africa Spectrum*, 48, 1, 49-70.

ISSN: 1868-6869 (online), ISSN: 0002-0397 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:  
<[www.africa-spectrum.org](http://www.africa-spectrum.org)>

---

Published by  
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of African Affairs  
in co-operation with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation Uppsala and Hamburg  
University Press.

*Africa Spectrum* is an Open Access publication.  
It may be read, copied and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the  
Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

To subscribe to the print edition: <[iaa@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:iaa@giga-hamburg.de)>  
For an e-mail alert please register at: <[www.africa-spectrum.org](http://www.africa-spectrum.org)>

*Africa Spectrum* is part of the GIGA Journal Family which includes:  
Africa Spectrum • Journal of Current Chinese Affairs • Journal of Current Southeast  
Asian Affairs • Journal of Politics in Latin America • <[www.giga-journal-family.org](http://www.giga-journal-family.org)>



# Becoming Zimbabwe or Becoming Zimbabwean: Identity, Nationalism and State-building

Alois S. Mlambo

**Abstract:** This lecture explores the processes of identity-making and state-building in a multi-ethnic and multiracial society recently emerging from a protracted armed struggle against racially ordered, settler-colonial domination. It explores the extent to which historical factors, such as the nature of the state, the prevailing national political economy, and regional and international forces and developments have shaped notions of belonging and citizenship over time and have affected state-building efforts. The role of the postcolonial state and economy, political developments and the land question in shaping the postcolonial dispensation is also examined. The lecture argues that, like most African states created by colonialism, Zimbabwe is not yet a nation and that it is only in the process of becoming. It also comments on the role of historians in shaping notions of nationhood and identity.

■ Manuscript received 1 December 2012; accepted 7 January 2013

**Keywords:** Zimbabwe, nation and state-building, society, national identity

Alois S. Mlambo is a Professor of History in the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. He has published widely on the social and economic history of Zimbabwe. His major publications include the following: *The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme: The Zimbabwean Case, 1990–1995* (1997), *The Political Economy of the Zimbabwean Sugar Industry, 1920–1990* (1996, with E. S. Pangeti), *Zimbabwe: A History of Manufacturing, 1890–1995* (2000, with E. S. Pangeti and I. Phimister), *White Immigration into Rhodesia: From Occupation to Federation* (2003), *African Scholarly Publishing: Essays* (2007, editor), and *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History of Zimbabwe from the Pre-colonial Period to 2008* (2009, with B. Raftopoulos, editors).

E-mail: <Alois.Mlambo@up.ac.za>

Alois S. Mlambo originally presented this paper as his inaugural lecture upon becoming the new head of the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies at the University of Pretoria on 30 October 2012. After a review process, it has been accepted for publication in full length.

### The Editors

After many years of bitter armed conflict between the liberation forces and the colonial state, Zimbabwe gained independence in 1980 amid much joyous celebration over what was expected to be the beginning of a new era of racial equality, fairness, and constructive and harmonious nation-building and general welfare that would serve as a shining example to the rest of the continent. This seemed all the more possible in light of the magnanimous statement by the incoming prime minister, Robert Mugabe, where he called for forgiveness for past wrongs and reconciliation between former enemies. On 17 April 1980, he told a very nervous white Zimbabwean population:

If yesterday I fought you as an enemy, today you have become a friend and ally with the same national interest, loyalty, rights and duties as myself. If yesterday you hated me, today you cannot avoid the love that binds you to me and me to you. The wrongs of the past now stand forgiven and forgotten [...]. I urge you, whether you are White or Black, to join me in a new pledge to forget our grim past, forgive others and forget, join hands in a new amity and together, as Zimbabweans, trample upon racialism, tribalism and regionalism and work hard to reconstruct and rehabilitate our society as we re-invigorate our economic machinery (Mpofu 2003).

Yet, hardly two years into independence, the Korean-trained Fifth Brigade of the Zimbabwean National Army was wreaking havoc in Matebeleland – whose inhabitants were now denounced as anti-government dissidents who had to be crushed at all costs – and killed an estimated 20,000 people in the process. Two decades later, President Mugabe was equally denouncing white Zimbabweans as enemies of the state, whom he claimed should also be punished; Mugabe backed violent farm invasions that drove white farmers and farm labourers off the land. The government was also vilifying black Zimbabweans who were members of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) opposition party formed in 1999, calling them “sell-outs”, “traitors” and “puppets of the West”.

By the new millennium, therefore, the idealism of the liberation struggle, with its promise of justice and fair play, had been replaced by a harsh, paranoid, autocratic, self-serving and arrogant political culture that now routinely violently suppressed any political dissent, muzzled the press and systematically undermined the judiciary. The question that arises is why had

Zimbabwe failed to live up to the expectations brought about by independence of developing as a harmonious country with a common national identity? A related question is whether it had been realistic or over-optimistic for anyone to expect such an identity to develop, given the country's history. Even more pertinent questions are: To what extent was Zimbabwe ever a nation and, following that line of thinking, who exactly is a Zimbabwean?

According to a new public history, one Terence Ranger (2010: 505-510) has labelled "patriotic history", which is propagated in the state-controlled newspapers and radio and television stations by so-called "intellectuals" of ZANU-PF, Zimbabwe was a country in which people lived harmoniously as one nation before the disruption of British colonialism. This view takes off from Robert Mugabe's statement in 1977, where he said that a future, independent Zimbabwe was "a natural 'Shona' nation" whose roots lay in pre-colonial polities and that

the distinguishing features of our nation, cultural homogeneity, our biological and genetic identity, our social system, our geography, [and] our history, which together characterise our national identity, also combined in producing out of our people a national, vigorous and positive spirit which manifests itself in the consistently singular direction of its own preservation (Bhebe and Ranger 2001: xxvi).

Mugabe's statement confirms Ranger's view that "patriotic history"

assumes the immanence of a Zimbabwean nation expressed through centuries of Shona resistance to external intrusion; embodied in successive "empires"; incarnated through the great spirit mediums in the first Chimurenga [war of resistance to British colonial rule] of 1896-7; and re-incarnated by means of the alliance between [spirit] mediums and ZANLA guerrillas in the second Chimurenga of the liberation war (Ranger 2010: 505).<sup>1</sup>

This is, obviously, a self-serving oversimplification of the country's past meant to legitimise ZANU-PF rule as the logical and rightful successor to Zimbabwe's precolonial rulers of what was then, ostensibly, a united Shona nation. The reality is very different. Indeed, as the Zimbabwean scholar Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009a) has asked, do Zimbabweans exist? Did they, in fact, ever exist? Or is present-day Zimbabwe merely a colonial and nationalist construct which is yet to become a nation? In Ndlovu-Gatsheni's words,

like all historically and socially constructed phenomena, [Zimbabwe] is exceedingly difficult to define. It is a complex mosaic of contending

---

1 ZANLA = Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army.

histories and memories, making it as much a reality as it is an idea – a construction not only moulded out of precolonial, colonial and nationalist pasts, but also out of [sic] global values of sovereignty, self-determination and territorial integrity. It is an idea born out of continuing synthesis of multilayered, overlapping and cross-pollinating historical genealogies, and contending nationalisms, as well as suppressed local and regional sovereignties (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009a: 46).

The above questions evoke more related questions about what has inhibited the development of a common Zimbabwean identity, a Zimbabwean common sense of nationalism and the construction of a viable, successful and coherent nation-state.

In search of answers to these and other questions, this contribution explores the processes of identity-making and state-building in a multi-ethnic and multiracial society that has recently emerged from a protracted armed struggle against racially ordered, settler-colonial domination. It examines the extent to which historical factors, such as the nature of the state, the prevailing national political economy, and regional and international forces and developments have shaped notions of belonging and citizenship over time and affected state-building efforts. It does this with a view to investigating how Zimbabwe's lived experience has produced various and competing historical narratives about its past; what factors have contributed to the political economy of historical knowledge production in a colonial and post-colonial setting; and how this has further complicated the process of the development of a common identity.

The lecture contends that many factors have militated against the development of a common national identity, including, among other things, the country's ethnic diversity; the colonial legacy of racism; autocratic intolerance of political dissent; a racialised, unequal socio-economic regime; the armed conflict that tore the fabric of Zimbabwe's society for almost two decades and left the races divided; the policy of reconciliation after independence (the vexatious question of land ownership that remained dangerously unresolved for twenty years notwithstanding); and the problematic role of intellectuals, especially historians, in shaping competing perceptions about the country's past and present and fuelling difference rather than a sense of common and shared interests. These issues are briefly discussed below.

The underlying assumption here is that the challenges facing Zimbabwe in its postcolonial nation-building and state-formation efforts may not be too dissimilar to those that have faced, are facing, or are likely to face other Southern African countries that are also multi-ethnic, multicultural and multiracial and also emerged from a contested past of racial domination and armed conflict, such as Mozambique, Angola, Namibia and, indeed, South Africa.

Starting with a loose definition of key terms, the lecture discusses historical challenges Zimbabwe has faced in its quest for a common national identity and an all-embracing nationalism. I will then conclude by briefly commenting on the role of historians and historiography in the shaping of the country's self-perception and their impact on the quest for a national identity. By way of a disclaimer, however, it must be noted that arguing for the need for Zimbabwe to develop a national identity is not necessarily an endorsement of nationalism or the nation-state as the best systems of social organisation, but merely an acknowledgement of the fact that these are, currently, the dominant organising principles of our world.

The term "nation" will be used to refer to "an aggregate of persons, so closely associated with each other by common descent, language or history, as to form a distinct race or people, usually organised as a separate political state and occupying a definite territory" (Fenton 2010: 13), while "nationalism" refers to devotion and loyalty to one's own nation. In addition, the term "national identity" is used loosely to refer to what Anthony Smith (1991: 14) has defined as the self-perception of

a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members.

As used here, therefore, the term assumes the presence of various common attributes, such as the "belief in a common culture, history, kinship, language, religion, territory, founding moment and destiny" (Smith 1991: 14), along with other markers of a shared heritage.

## Historical Challenges to the Development of a National Identity in Zimbabwe

On the basis of the above criteria, some authors contend that Zimbabwe in the precolonial period was not yet a nation, but only one in the making. Further, it has been asserted that this process was interrupted and reconfigured by colonialism, and that the country's task in the postcolonial era has been to build a nation with a clear national identity. Like most African countries, which were essentially colonial creations and the products of the Western imperial and African nationalist imagination, Zimbabwe is, in fact, a nation in the process of becoming. In the context of Zimbabwe's varied and contested pasts, along with the complicating factors of ethnicity, class, gender and a racially defined and colour-based colonial political dispensation that lasted almost eighty years, reality could not be otherwise. Given this situation, the earlier optimism of Zimbabwean nationalist leaders that an

“unquestioned national identity” would emerge out of the crucible of the anticolonial liberation struggle was little more than a fantasy (Raftopoulos and Mlambo 2009: xvi-xxiii).

Meanwhile, what had passed for nationalism in the days of the anticolonial struggle was no more than a desire for self-determination. The intensity and power of this nationalism is not to be underestimated as it successfully drove the “winds of change” across the continent and led to African independence. The class, ethnic, ideological, organisational, regional and international characteristics of Zimbabwean anticolonial nationalism have been well studied by various scholars and need not be lingered upon here (cf. Raftopoulos 1999). The point is not to dismiss twentieth-century African anticolonial nationalism as unimportant, but merely to point out the fact that, whatever it was, it was not an expression of cultural, linguistic and historical solidarity since it brought together different communities – namely, Shona, Ndebele, coloured, Indian, and white, who had little in common except their shared opposition to colonial rule.

Unlike Europe in the nineteenth century, where nationalism emerged as an aggressive assertion of a given people’s need to establish and claim territorial entities that reflected their sense of oneness built over centuries of sharing a common language, history, culture and world view, African countries were externally created by the colonial powers, which had no knowledge of the realities on the ground and, as in the case of Nigeria, bundled together 250 different ethnolinguistic groups (including Muslims and Christians) in one country that they imagined and willed to become a nation called Nigeria. What this means, therefore, is that, at independence, Africa had states or countries that had yet to become nations.

The lived experiences of the people now known as Zimbabweans do not sustain patriotic history’s claim that Zimbabwe has always been a nation. In fact, Zimbabwe has always been a land of different communities with different cultures and histories whose collective lives cannot be recounted through one single historical narrative. While the Shona-speaking people are the majority of the country’s population – currently comprising approximately 80 per cent of the population – and have been there longer than most other groups that claim Zimbabwe as their home, they are by no means the only ethnic, racial or cultural group; neither are they, themselves, a monolithic entity, given the competing subethnic forces within the seemingly united Shona grouping.

Indeed, Zimbabwe’s history may be best understood in the context of its ethnic, cultural and racial diversity, characteristics that are often associated with immigrant societies, of which Zimbabwe is arguably one. The first immigrants who arrived, albeit thousands of years ago, were the Bantu-

speaking groups, the ancestors of the present Shona-speaking groups, which currently include the Zezuru, Korekore, Manyika, Karanga, Ndau and Kalanga subgroups. They drove the aborigines, the San, off the land or incorporated them into their society. Thereafter, waves of immigrants entered the country at various points throughout history, including the Nguni groups, the whites, and the immigrant workers from surrounding territories. Presently, apart from the major ethnolinguistic groups already mentioned, there are also other minor groups, such as the Nyanja/Chewa, Tonga, Shangani, Barwe, Sotho, Venda, Chikunda, Xhosa, Sena, Hwesa and Nambya communities.

It can be argued that, while there was a succession of precolonial political entities – which we may call states or kingdoms, such as the Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe, Munhumutapa and Rozvi Kingdoms, which were dominated by ancestors of the present-day Shona-speaking groups – not everyone in the area lived under, was governed by, or subscribed to the political authority of these dominant political units. As Gerald Mazarire (2009: 1-28) has clearly demonstrated, there was a wide range of smaller ethnic groups that occupied the same space as, or adjacent space to, the dominant political groupings who, in any case, did not call themselves Shona – a term that was created by colonialists to describe people who spoke mutually intelligible languages and shared certain cultural traits.

Moreover, the arrival of different ethnic and cultural groups in the form of Nguni warriors from the south in the mid-nineteenth century, including the Jere of Zwangendava and the Gaza-Nguni of Soshangane and, finally, the Ndebele of Mzilikazi Khumalo, further complicated the country's ethnic makeup and nation-building efforts. On the eve of European colonisation, therefore, what was to become Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) was a territory composed of variegated ethnic/cultural groupings comprising the “Shona” cluster and its various subgroups; small autochthonous communities; the Ndau, now incorporating the Gaza-Nguni; and the Ndebele Nguni who were, themselves, multi-ethnic, as they comprised the original Nguni groups from Zululand (Abezansi), Sotho and others groups incorporated by Mzilikazi en route to Matebeleland (Abenbla) and the conquered Rozvi groups (Amahole), who were also made part of the Ndebele state (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009b: 60).

The next immigrants were the whites who colonised the country in 1890. They, too, were not a homogenous group, as colonising parties and early white settlers were a mixture of people of British and Afrikaans stock, soon to be joined by Poles, European Jews, Italians, Greeks and other people representing “shades of whiteness” that made it equally impossible to speak of a common culture and “biological and genetic identity” even among whites. Indeed, tensions soon developed in the white community, as settlers of British stock fought hard to ensure that Rhodesia remained a



British colony and regarded themselves as being “more white than others” (Mlambo 1998, 2001, 2003).

The Rhodesian government, which was dominated by British immigrants at the time, for instance, consistently resisted Jewish immigration even at the height of Nazi Germany’s purging of the Jews, despite the fact that the Rhodesian government always wanted to build Rhodesia as a white man’s country, ostensibly because (European) Jews and other non-British whites were not the right sort of immigrants! Rhodesians of British stock disliked the Afrikaners most and marginalised them in white Rhodesian politics until after the Second World War (Mlambo 2003).

Meanwhile, the rate at which white immigrants were leaving for greener pastures soon after they had entered the country was so high that white Rhodesia was truly a nation of immigrants, rather than a society rooted in the Pioneers of the early colonial period. It is interesting, for instance, that

most of the 1965 UDI rebels who appealed to the free and proud spirit of their Pioneer ancestors to mobilise domestic support for their defiance of the world were, in fact, not descendants of the Pioneers at all,

as only 27 per cent of the Rhodesia Front Party leadership were Rhodesian-born (Schultz 1975: 605).<sup>2</sup> Thus, even among the dominant white population, there was no real sense of nationhood or even a shared vision of what constituted “Rhodesian-ness”. Add to this already-complex mix the Asian and coloured communities, with their own distinct cultures, and Zimbabwe’s racial, cultural and ethnic complexity becomes more evident.

As if this ethnic and racial diversity were not enough, the Rhodesian and South African economies, based mainly on mining and plantation agriculture, spawned migrant labour systems that drew African labourers from as far afield as Nyasaland (Malawi), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Mozambique. This labour system, well studied by historian Charles van Onselen in his seminal book *Chibaro* (van Onselen 1976), saw thousands of non-indigenous African workers pouring into Rhodesia to take up mining and agricultural jobs that the local Africans shunned as beneath their dignity. At the end of the contracts, many migrant labourers settled in the country with local women and raised families.

## Colonial Rule and Its Legacy

While European colonialism brought several benefits to the country, its racist policies, which manifested themselves in a variety of ways, did not

---

2 UDI = Unilateral Declaration of Independence.

engender positive race relations or the development of a common national identity between whites and the majority African population. Among the most obvious racist policies were a colour bar legislated by Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister Godfrey Huggins in his well-known “two-pyramid policy” (a milder version of what later became the Apartheid policy of separate development in South Africa); a job reservation policy that kept certain jobs and professions exclusively for whites; the petty racial policies that were designed to humiliate Africans at every turn; and the exclusion of Africans from meaningful political and economic participation, reducing them to second-class citizens.

Under colonial rule, there were, in fact, two Rhodesias made up of, to borrow from Mahmood Mamdani (1996), Citizens (white Rhodesians, politically and economically powerful, and enjoying full rights of citizenship) and Subjects (those derogatively known as the “natives”: the African majority who were subject to a special type of jurisprudence known as “customary law” which was not applicable to whites). Often, when colonial administrators spoke of Rhodesians, they did not, as a rule, include Africans as full-fledged members of that group, regarding them merely as wards under the whites’ paternalist care, often patronisingly referred to as “our Africans”.

It was, indeed, grievances about these and other policies which contributed to the armed struggle of the 1960s and 1970s when Africans, under the banner of two nationalist liberation movements, the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), took up arms to overthrow white rule. The armed struggle pitted African liberation forces against those fighting to defend the status quo, both whites and blacks, in the Rhodesian police, Armed Forces, the notorious Selous Scouts, and the Rhodesian intelligence agencies. The question of why Africans fought in defence of a system that clearly oppressed them is an interesting one that, however, goes outside the framework of the current discussion.

What is important for our purposes is that the armed conflict sowed deep seeds of racial hostility that would prove almost impossible to overcome after independence. As Rory Pilosof (2012) documented, when white farmers came under siege during the farm-invasions period of the early 2000s, the terms they used to describe Africans in general and those that were invading their farms, in particular, were a disturbing throwback to the racist labels of the liberation war period. Similarly, those who were invading white farms sang liberation war songs and chanted liberation war slogans that denounced white people. Thus, deeply embedded in the Zimbabwean psyche is the mutual hostility born of the armed conflict days; something that has militated against any meaningful reconciliation, a necessary prerequisite for true nation-building.

Further complicating the issue were the divisions among the Africans fighting colonial rule, which entrenched ethnic/political tensions rather than promoting unity and cooperation among the African people. While the two Zimbabwean liberation movements were not entirely ethnically based, as each continued to have some leaders from each of the two major ethnic groups, they were essentially ethnically based in terms of general membership. Thus, ZAPU, under Joshua Nkomo, was mainly a Ndebele party, while ZANU, under Ndabaningi Sithole and, subsequently, Robert Mugabe, was associated mostly with the Shona majority. ZANU had broken away from ZAPU in 1963, which was followed by bitter clashes between rival supporters of the two parties until they were banned by the colonial administration in 1964. Their bitter rivalry never really disappeared. It is telling, for instance, that some of the bitterest armed clashes during the years of the liberation struggle were between ZANLA (ZANU) and ZIPRA (ZAPU) fighters<sup>3</sup> when they met in the field, testifying to the deep hostility between the two groups.

The two parties did come together towards the end of the liberation struggle as the Patriotic Front in order to negotiate the handover of power to the African majority, but the partnership unravelled soon after the 1979 Lancaster House Agreement when Mugabe's ZANU-Patriotic Front decided to contest the independence general elections separately from ZAPU-Patriotic Front. The old rivalry soon resurfaced when the ruling party of Robert Mugabe accused ZAPU of being in league with bandits who had begun to attack government properties and installations in Matebeleland in protest against the manner in which their party had been sidelined after independence. Consequently, the government launched a savage military campaign in Matebeleland that ended only when ZAPU-PF agreed to merge with ZANU-PF in the 1987 Unity Agreement that saw the former nearly completely swallowed up by the latter.

On the surface, the Unity Agreement appeared to have resolved the ethnic conflict of the dissident war, but the massacre of the Ndebele citizens by the Fifth Brigade had sown seeds of deep resentment among some Ndebeles, not just against the ruling ZANU-PF government but, as it was to turn out, against the Shona people in general. The result was the emergence in later years of a Ndebele ethnonationalist movement calling itself the Mthwakazi Liberation Front (MLF), which advocated for the secession of Matebeleland and the establishment of an independent Ndebele state.

In any case, there had always been tensions along class, gender and ethnic lines in the anticolonial movement even before the armed struggle,

---

3 ZIPRA = Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army.

with disagreements sometimes arising over methods and objectives of the anticolonial struggle. There had, for instance, long been tensions between the educated African elites (the middle classes) and the ordinary workers, with many of the former subscribing to the policy of “partnership” – advanced by liberal white Rhodesians grouped in such organisations as the Inter-Racial Association and the Capricorn Society – which was designed to promote cooperation between whites and educated Africans.

Frequenting interracial tea parties hosted by white members of these associations, the African elite then strongly believed that the doors of the colonial power structure were opening for them at last and that they would benefit from Cecil John Rhodes’ adage of “equal rights for all civilised men”. This seemed to be the case until they discovered that the type of partnership that the whites had in mind, as stated by the Prime Minister of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Godfrey Huggins, was that of “a rider and a horse”. It was only then that the African elite linked up with the ordinary workers and the masses to lead the nationalist struggle.

Meanwhile, as noted, despite the announcement of reconciliation at independence, the bad blood between whites and Africans had not entirely dissipated. The “elephant in the room” of postcolonial Zimbabwe, to paraphrase Zimbabwean historian James Muzondidya (2010), was the unresolved question of race. African resentment against the whites arose, in part because of memories of the colonial past but also because of the perceived continued economic privileges enjoyed by the white population into the independence period, especially their continued domination of the economy. It was also fed by the tendency of Zimbabwean whites, for a variety of reasons, to withdraw from public political life and to retire into exclusive social spaces, such as private sport clubs with high membership fees and expensive private schools for their children. This was read by some Africans as the white people’s refusal to identify with the new nation and evidence of a continuation of the social segregation of yesteryear.

African hostility was particularly fuelled by the persistently skewed land distribution that left a small white farming population with most of the arable land, while Africans remained crowded in the former African Reserves. Radical land reform by the incoming independence government had been forestalled by the 1979 Lancaster House Agreement which ruled that land could only be acquired from white farmers on a willing-buyer-willing-seller basis and that compensation for any acquired land could only be in hard currency. In any case, the independence government had not really pushed the land reform issue for the first two decades, fearing to upset the applecart and ruin the agricultural industry, which was the country’s proverbial cash cow. Meanwhile, it was charged at the time that, due to corruption

and nepotism, acquired land for resettlement did not always go to the needy poor majority but to members of the powerful ruling elite.

Thus by 2000, two decades after independence, land distribution remained highly skewed against the African majority. This was potentially dangerous if some demagogues of the ruling party should ever need a cause with which to inflame anti-white sentiments for selfish party gains. This is precisely what occurred after 2000 when, facing declining political popularity, the ruling party used white farmers as scapegoats for Zimbabwe's economic and political problems as a way of reviving popular support.

Meanwhile, the autocratic nature of colonial rule which had not allowed African people space to voice their grievances freely or to challenge the political status quo came back to haunt the postcolonial efforts at nation-building. Just as in the colonial period, Zimbabwe's new rulers, themselves direct victims of this autocracy, were quick to resort to the various instruments of state repression to silence political dissent. After all, many of those who formed Zimbabwe's independence government in 1980 were members of what anticolonial struggle activists had come to identify, proudly, as "prison graduates". In fact, the first independent cabinet comprised the "who's who" of Rhodesia's political prisoners. Among these were Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe, who each spent no less than ten years in detention for advocating political rights for the African majority.

Therefore, the programmed default position for many of the postcolonial leaders was, unfortunately, repression and the use of violence when they felt threatened by alternative political imaginations. It seems the lesson had been well learnt that political dissent was best handled by the police, prisons and the security intelligence services rather than through dialogue and negotiation. In fact, the culture of intolerance for political opponents was inherited lock, stock and barrel by the new ruling elites and deployed effectively against political opponents.

In his work on postcolonial governments emerging from former liberation movements in Southern Africa, Henning Melber (2003a, 2003b, 2008) has pointed out the irony of the fact that those who had struggled to end colonial injustices tended to exhibit the very negative and repressive characteristics of the systems that they fought so hard to overthrow when they became rulers of their countries. It is as if, in fighting against colonial domination and racial discrimination, liberation movements inadvertently became the very thing they were fighting against. This would seem to be the case here.

Meanwhile, matters came to a head in 2000, when the then-ruling party, ZANU-PF, was confronted for the first time since independence in 1980: its challenger was the strongest-ever political opposition to its rule, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The MDC had been established in

1999 by a coalition of civil society bodies led by the workers who were unhappy with the way the country was being governed, the deteriorating economic situation, and the continued use of the Lancaster House Constitution of 1979, which, in any case, had been amended umpteen times to suit the whims of the ruling party. Working through an organisation called the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), established for the purpose of creating a new constitution, civil society pushed for this change.

Determined to snatch back the initiative, the ZANU-PF government hijacked the process and proposed a new constitution of its own. However, the proposed constitution's increase in presidential powers and the new clauses allowing government to acquire white-owned farms without compensation made the NCA and the MDC determined to campaign for a "no" vote in the 2000 referendum held to test public opinion on the matter. The "no" vote won overwhelmingly.

Incensed by this defeat and further alarmed at the remarkable showing of the recently established MDC in the national elections of the same year, the ruling party lashed out at those it considered its enemies – namely, white farmers, whom it accused of being the funders and brains behind the formation of the MDC; farm workers, many of whom it suspected of voting against the government in the referendum and at white farmers' instigation; and MDC supporters, who posed such a strong challenge to ZANU-PF's hitherto unchallenged dominance. The result was commercial white farm invasions characterised by widespread violence across the land. The international outcry that accompanied these activities and the violations of human rights they entailed led to the country being ostracised by mostly Western governments and to the subsequent economic meltdown that kicked off the Zimbabwean crisis of the first decade of the new millennium.

In this heated atmosphere, the national project quickly unravelled, as reverse racism against whites peaked, while black-on-black violence was widespread as members of the opposition MDC were targeted by the ZANU-PF militia and by some former fighters of the liberation war. All this mayhem occurred under the slogan of "Zimbabwe will never be a colony again", since the ruling party made the charge that the reaction by Western powers to ostracise Zimbabwe's government and impose travel restrictions on some of its members were attempts by Britain and its Western allies to re-colonise the country. Thus, supporters of the ruling party now divided Zimbabweans into patriots (those in support of government policies and farm invasions) and "sell-outs", "traitors" or "puppets of the West", which included anyone critical of any aspect of ZANU-PF's policies and practices. It was not enough anymore, it seems, for one to have historical and ancestral

roots in the country to be a Zimbabwean. Zimbabwean-ness was now determined by political affiliation and allegiance to a particular political standpoint!

The labelling and demonising of political opponents was accompanied by an official rhetoric of pan-African solidarity and revolutionary fervor that sought to revive the strong emotions of the liberation struggle and to present Zimbabwe as a country caught in a life-and-death struggle for survival against the West's determination to reverse the gains of the liberation struggle. Suddenly, whites had ceased to be fellow citizens of the unified country Mugabe represented during his reconciliation speech at independence and had become enemies of the state to be crushed. Dual citizenship was outlawed, and whites were now required to prove their loyalty to Zimbabwe by denouncing the citizenship of their ancestral home countries, even for those – like the long-time anticolonial fighter Judith Todd and others – who had never claimed citizenship in these countries.

Equally, descendants of Malawian immigrant workers who had been born and lived in the country all their lives, some since the 1920s and 1930s, were now told to go back where they originally came from, even though they knew no other home apart from Zimbabwe. The more extreme Shona nationalists were even denouncing Ndebeles who were critical of ZANU-PF policies as recent newcomers to the country who had no stake in it, telling Ndebeles they should go back to Zululand where they originally came from. Increasingly, therefore, nationalism or national identity became little more than a narrow Shona chauvinistic particularism inspired by rising xenophobic tendencies. To underpin this new conception of Zimbabwe, a new parochial and highly distorted historiography, “patriotic history”, was developed. This will be discussed below.

The lowest point in the postcolonial era came with the acrimonious 2008 presidential elections, which were marred by unprecedented political violence that saw one of the contestants, Morgan Tsvangirai of the MDC, withdraw from the race in protest; President Mugabe subsequently claimed victory under very questionable circumstances. The political stalemate that resulted from these developments was only solved when the main Zimbabwean political parties agreed to enter into a transitional power-sharing arrangement under the Global Political Agreement (GPA) brokered by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 2009.

To conclude this section, there was, thus, little in the ethnic, racial and cultural past of Zimbabwe before, during and after colonialism that had laid an adequate and appropriate foundation for the development of a common national identity or an efficient modern state with a commitment to the welfare of its entire people. Colonial rule and the anticolonial armed struggle that it provoked had polarised the population along mainly racial lines, while

African struggle movements were divided along largely ethnic lines, in what Zimbabwean political scientist Masipula Sithole has characterised as “struggles within the struggle” (1979). Meanwhile, postcolonial government policies and practices did little to unify the country.

As of the end of 2012, Zimbabwe was still a very divided country, one characterised by tensions between some Ndebeles and the state – arising from the Gukurahundi massacres in the 1980s – as well as between the state and its supporters, on the one hand, and whites (particularly former white farmers), on the other hand, over the controversial land reform programme that displaced them from the land. There were also tensions within the African population, in general, over political differences in which ZANU-PF supporters stand antagonistic to opposition movements such as the MDC and other smaller parties with regard to issues of governance and human rights. Indications are that there may be politically and/or ethnically inspired divisions within ZANU-PF itself.

Thus, while all these groups and subgroups claim to be Zimbabweans, there seems to be no agreed understanding of what being Zimbabwean really entails, with some claiming to be the real patriots as opposed to others who, ostensibly, are not. In short, Zimbabwe still has to transform itself from the geographical expression established arbitrarily by British colonialism in 1890 and enthusiastically imagined by the anticolonial nationalists of the 1960s into a true nation with a common identity, common values and a shared vision for the future. In answer to the earlier question of whether Zimbabweans exist, therefore, the answer would have to be: “Not yet.”

## Historians and the Nation: From No History to “Patriotic History”

Historians and history writing have played an important role in shaping perceptions of Zimbabwe’s past and in influencing present conceptions of nationhood, citizenship and belonging. The political economy of historical knowledge production in both the colonial and postcolonial periods has been largely marked by a tendency for those in power at a given time to harness history to legitimise their dominance. This should not be surprising given Karl Marx’s insightful observation that the dominant ideas of any age are the ideas of its ruling classes or, to paraphrase an African saying, “Until lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunters.” This was, indeed, true of both colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwean historiography.

It is ironic that Terence Ranger should be the scholar decrying “patriotic history” today, especially since it was his earlier writings, particularly his



*Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* (1967) and *The African Voice* (1970), which initiated the trend of celebrating the dynamism of precolonial African nationalism and fired the imagination of nationalists of the 1960s, providing them with convenient usable myths about their past and martyrs for the anticolonial cause. It was Ranger's depiction of precolonial Zimbabwean societies that inspired Mugabe to make his 1977 statement affirming the existence of a precolonial Shona nation. Ranger had painted an inspiring picture of a heroic indigenous struggle against European colonialism during the 1896–1897 Chimurenga wars of resistance which, in his view, were collaborative and well-coordinated Ndebele and Shona nationalist wars of resistance. Ranger's oversimplification and, arguably, romanticisation of the precolonial Zimbabwean past were subsequently heavily criticised by scholars such as Julian Cobbing (1977) and David Beach (1979).

At the time, however, Ranger's approach seemed to be a logical response to a colonial historiography that seemed determined to deny Africans any meaningful past. Typical of this Eurocentric scholarly approach was Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper's 1960 public lecture which categorically asserted that there was no African history before the arrival of the white man on the continent. In 1969, this highly respected Oxford Don again repeated the argument, labelling the entire African continent, including Ethiopia and Egypt, as "un-historic" (Trevor-Roper 1965: 9-11), arguing that

perhaps in the future [he was probably thinking of centuries ahead] there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely [...] darkness. And darkness is not a subject of history.

He added, in what can be regarded as a forerunner of the "West-and-the-rest" worldview, which is very much in vogue in some sections of Western societies today:

The history of the world for the past five centuries, in so far as it has significance, has been European history [...]. It follows that the study of history is and must be Eurocentric. For we can ill afford to amuse ourselves with the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe (Trevor-Roper 1965: 9).

Not surprisingly, therefore, colonial Rhodesian historiography paid scant attention to the history of precolonial societies. At the same time, an orchestrated campaign was made to deny the Africans any usable past. Considerable energy was expended on denying that there had been any coherent social and political organisation in precolonial Zimbabwe and that the imposing stone structures at Great Zimbabwe in Southern Zimbabwe were the product of African enterprise. Colonial historians and commentators insisted that

these structures were built by the Arabs, the Phoenicians, the Queen of Sheba, King Solomon, or the Portuguese – anyone else but the indigenous people who were, ostensibly, not sophisticated enough to have constructed such a wonder.

There was even speculation that the stone structures were probably evidence of a white civilisation that had existed in the area at some earlier date. Meanwhile, colonial fantasies about Zimbabwe's reportedly "savage" precolonial past fed the imagination of Ryder Haggard and his *King Solomon's Mines* and the various accounts of Zimbabwe as an exotic and rich Eldorado that exercised the late-nineteenth-century European imagination.

Indeed, as late as 1997, despite many scholarly works documenting the existence of several precolonial kingdoms in the country, former Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith could still write about Cecil Rhodes' Pioneer Column that spearheaded the colonisation of Zimbabwe in 1890 in the following terms:

[They were] going into uncharted country, the domain of the lion, elephant, the buffalo, the rhinoceros – all deadly killers – the black mamba, the most deadly of all snakes, and the Matabele, with Lobengula's *impis*, the most deadly of all black warriors [...]. But if the mission was to raise the flag for queen and country, no questions were asked. Moreover, their consciences were clear: to the west the Matabeles had recently moved in [...]. The eastern parts of the country were settled by a number of different tribes, nomadic people who had migrated from the north and east, constantly moving to and fro in order to accommodate their needs and wants. To the south were scattered settlements of Shangaans from Mozambique and Northern Transvaal. *Clearly it was no-man's land, as Cecil Rhodes and the politicians back in London had confirmed, so no one could accuse them of trespassing or taking part in an invasion* (Smith 1997: 1-2; emphasis added).

Of the long-established kingdoms of Mapungubwe, Great Zimbabwe, Munhumutapa and the Rozvi, not a word is mentioned!

It is this self-serving mentality that Ranger was trying to counter by emphasising African agency and nationalist anticolonial coordination and mobilisation. In doing this, however, he may have sown the seeds of the current "patriotic history", which can be seen as a perversion of Ranger's earlier nationalist historiography. In this version of history, the other liberation movement, ZAPU, has virtually been written out of Zimbabwe's history and whites now only appear in this narrative as villains, racists, oppressors and exploiters. On the other side of the coin are the numerous, equally distorted white Zimbabwean autobiographies that have emerged in recent years that paint a very idealistic and rosy picture of life in the colonial period

where white employers and their African workers were one continuous happy family and Africans just loved their white employers! (Buckle 2002, 2003; Barker 2007)

Clearly, historians and historiography are important in shaping society's self-perception, particularly societies such as our own that are struggling to develop common national identities and to establish states that are truly inclusive, in the wake of rather traumatic, divisive and acrimonious pasts in which one dominant group presided over a system that marginalised the majority and effectively wrote them out of history. The danger today, as is becoming evident in Zimbabwe, is that with the ascendancy of the African majority to political power throughout Southern Africa there may simply be an inversion of the previous dispensation, in which history is now used to marginalise the former dominant white groups, who in turn may well be written out of national histories.

In view of this real potential danger, it is crucial not only that, as history teachers, we impart the various skills of research, analysis, ordering and prioritisation of evidence, argumentation, and effective communication that history as a subject has always provided students, but also that we teach our students to be critical and objective about the past, as well as to empathise with the experiences of other groupings whose historical trajectories may be different from their own. Whether they become professional historians or not, we should equip our graduates with the necessary skills to interrogate the past critically and dispassionately and to produce historical accounts that are as unbiased as possible so as to provide a context in which members of past antagonistic groups can understand each other better and, hopefully, find each other.

They also must be made aware that many cultures and societies have contributed to our countries and world today and that it was not and has never been just a matter of "the West and the rest", in which the rest were merely passive recipients of the largesse of the West (Ferguson 2011). Exposing students to the complexity of our world and how it has come to be what it is through, for instance, providing courses on world history and on the historical experience of other societies in Latin America, Asia and elsewhere will open their eyes to the diversity and richness of the human experience in a global context.

Commenting on how Afrikaner historians had tended to focus in the past only on the history of whites in South Africa to the exclusion of blacks and pleading for a more balanced approach to the country's past, my predecessor as head of the Department of Historical and Heritage Studies, Professor Johan Bergh, in his inaugural lecture some 25 years ago, pointed out that it was essential to understand the fact that the "history of the whites" in

South Africa only made sense “within the context of the history of all the peoples of South Africa” and called for a new approach that would “give a rightful place to both whites and non-whites” in the national historical narrative. He concluded his lecture by pledging that, under his leadership, the Department would be innovative and keep up to date with scholarly trends in the field and always strive to reflect the diversity of South African society (Bergh 1987).

I would like to echo his sentiments and to add that, under my watch, the Department will do its utmost to ensure that its students are not only sensitive to the diversity and complexity of their own societies but that they are also made aware of the very rich history and contributions of other societies and cultures across the globe to our world today and of the fact that globalisation is not a new phenomenon but a process that is as old as mankind.

Above all, our graduates must be taught to appreciate what historian Louise White has characterised as the “messy” character of history in that, by their very nature, historical accounts exclude just as much as they include and that “there is no perfect closure to any event”. In fact, each historical narrative contains many silences that are part of the very process of its creation. According to White:

Not everyone is included in historical texts, let alone when those texts are joined together to make a narrative of the past. But the very messiness of the lived past, the very untidiness of the closures, means that all that has been omitted has not been erased. The most powerless actors left traces of themselves in contemporary accounts, just as the most powerful actors crafted versions of events that attempted to cover their traces or to leave traces of their reinvented personas [...]. [T]here can be “a real competition” between political and historical texts which claim to represent the past [...]. Looking at how texts compete, at what they compete over, and what is at stake in their competition, is a way to articulate the relationship between them (White 2003: 2-3).

To put this differently, our students must be taught to appreciate the fact that the version of the hunt from the point of view of the hunted is as valuable as the story of the hunter, if the true history of the hunt is to be fully captured. At least they should be conscious of the fact that the account of the hunter is neither the whole nor the only truth about the hunt. Ignoring this fundamental fact in the study of our collective pasts will simply take us down the “patriotic history” route which, through a selective presentation of the past, seeks to promote narrow, selfish agendas and does as much violence to that past as the earlier colonial historiography in which precolonial Africa was presented as nothing more than one big void or total “darkness”.

## References

- Barker, Jim (2007), *Paradise Plundered: The Story of a Zimbabwean Farm*, Zimbabwe: Jim Barker.
- Beach, David N. (1979), “Chimurenga”: The Shona Rising of 1896-1897, in: *Journal of African History*, 20, 3, 395-420.
- Bergh, Johan S. (1987), “Uitdagings vir die Afrikaans Historicus”, Inaugural Lecture presented at the University of Pretoria on 23 April 1987, online: <[http://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/12426/bergh\\_paper\\_1987.pdf?sequence=1](http://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/12426/bergh_paper_1987.pdf?sequence=1)> (17 October 2012).
- Bhebe, Ngwabi, and Terence O. Ranger (eds.), (2001), *Pre-Colonial and Colonial Legacies*, The Historical Dimensions of Democracy and Human Rights in Zimbabwe, vol. 1, Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications.
- Buckle, Catherine (2002), *African Tears: The Zimbabwe Land Invasions*, Johannesburg: Covos Day.
- Buckle, Catherine (2003), *Beyond Tears*, South Africa: Jonathan Ball Publishers.
- Cobbing, Julian (1977), The Absent Priesthood: Another Look at the Rhodesian Risings of 1896-1897, in: *Journal of African History*, 18, 1, 61-84.
- Fenton, Steve (2010), *Ethnicity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Cambridge UK: Polity Press.
- Ferguson, Niall (2011), *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, New York: Penguin Press.
- Mamdani, Mahmood (1996), *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Mazarire, Gerald C. (2009), Reflections on pre-Colonial Zimbabwe, c.850-1880, in: Brian Raftopoulos and Alois S. Mlambo (eds.), *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-colonial Period to 2008*, Harare: Weaver Press, 1-38
- Melber, Henning (2003a), *Limits to Liberation*, in: Henning Melber (ed.), *Re-examining Liberation in Namibia: Political Culture since Independence*, Stockholm: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 9-24;
- Melber, Henning (ed.) (2003b), *Limits to Liberation: The Unfinished Business of Democratic Consolidation*, Pretoria: HSRC Press.
- Melber, Henning (2008), Post-independence Authoritarianism, in: *Development & Cooperation*, 35, 10, 378-381.
- Mlambo, Alois S. (1998), Building a White Man’s Country: Trends in White Immigration into Rhodesia, 1890 to 1945, in: *Zambezia*, 25, 2, 123-146.
- Mlambo, Alois S. (2001), “Some Are More White Than Others”: Racial Chauvinism as a Factor in Rhodesian Immigration Policy, 1890 to 1963, in: *Zambezia*, 27, 2, 139-160.
- Mlambo, Alois S. (2003), *White Immigration into Rhodesia: From Occupation to Federation*, Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publishers.

- Mpofu, Busani (2003), *Brainstorming Racial Reconciliation in Southern Africa*, paper presented to the First International Conference on Race: Racial Reconciliation, University of Mississippi, USA, 1–4 October 2003.
- Muzondidya, James (2010), The Zimbabwean Crisis and the Unresolved Conundrum of Race in the Post-colonial Period, in: *Journal of Developing Societies*, 26, 1, 5–38.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo (2009a), *Do “Zimbabweans” Exist? Trajectories of Nationalism, National Identity Formation and Crisis in a Postcolonial State*, Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Sabelo (2009b), *The Ndebele Nation: Hegemony, Memory, Historiography*, Amsterdam: Rozenberg/Pretoria: UNISA.
- Pilososof, Rory (2012), *The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: Farmers’ Voices from Zimbabwe*, Harare: Weaver Press.
- Raftopoulos, Brian (1999), Problematising Nationalism in Zimbabwe: A Historiographical Review, in *Zambezia*, 26, 2, 115–134.
- Raftopoulos, Brian, and Alois S. Mlambo (eds.) (2009), *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-colonial Period to 2008*, Harare: Weaver Press.
- Ranger, Terence (2010), Constructions of Zimbabwe, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 36, 2, 505–510.
- Schultz, Barry M. (1975), Homeward Bound? A Survey Study of the Limits of White Rhodesian Nationalism and Permanence, in: *Ufahamu*, 3, 3, 81–117.
- Sithole, Masipula (1979), *Zimbabwe Struggles within the Struggle*, Harare: Rujeko Publishers.
- Smith, Anthony D. (1991), *National Identity*, London: Penguin Books.
- Smith, Ian Douglas (1997), *The Great Betrayal*, London: Blake Publishing Ltd.
- Trevor-Roper, Hugh (1965), *The Rise of Christian Europe*, London: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Trevor-Roper, Hugh (1969), The Past and Present: History and Sociology, in: *Past and Present*, 42, 3–17.
- Van Onselen, Charles (1976), *Chibaro: African Mine Labour in Southern Rhodesia, 1900–1933*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- White, Louise (2003), *The Assassination of Herbert Chitepo: Texts and Politics in Zimbabwe*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

### **Die Entstehung von Zimbabwe und Zimbabweern: Identität, Nationalismus und Staatsbildung**

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Beitrag – ursprünglich eine Antrittsvorlesung – sondiert Identitäts- und Staatsbildungsprozesse in der multi-ethnischen Gesellschaft Zimbabwes, die erst vor verhältnismäßig kurzer Zeit aus einem

langwierigen bewaffneten Kampf gegen eine nach rassistischen Kriterien geschichtete Siedler-Kolonie hervorgegangen ist. Untersucht wird, inwieweit historische Faktoren – wie die Struktur des Staates, die vorrangige nationale politische Ökonomie sowie regionale und internationale Kräfte und Entwicklungen – die Vorstellungen von Zusammengehörigkeit und Staatsbürgerschaft geprägt und die Bemühungen um die Bildung des neuen Staates beeinflusst haben, aber auch, inwieweit die entstandene Gesellschaftsordnung durch die postkoloniale Entwicklung von Staat, Wirtschaft und Politik sowie der Landfrage gestaltet wurde. Der Autor argumentiert, dass Zimbabwe – wie die meisten Staaten Afrikas, die durch den Kolonialismus geschaffen wurden – noch keine Nation ist, sondern sich erst im Prozess des Werdens befindet. Zudem verweist er auf die Rolle von Historikern bei der Gestaltung von Vorstellungen zu Nationalstaatlichkeit und Identität.

**Schlagwörter:** Zimbabwe, Nationen- und Staatenbildung, Gesellschaft, Nationale Identität