

## **Zimbabwe's state-controlled public media and the mediation of the 1980s genocide 30 years on**

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### **Abstract**

Since the end of genocide in 1987 Zimbabwe has remained a zone of 'conflicts', and the enduring debates surrounding this genocide, especially in public-owned but state-controlled media, call for critical attention. Three years after independence, in 1980, Zimbabwe was plunged into a genocide named 'Gukurahundi' (meaning the rain that washes the chaff away after harvest) that lasted until 1987. This article argues that there has been a clash of 'interests' playing out in the mediation of this yet-to-be-officially addressed genocide. Through evidence from public-owned media, the media that carry the official voice of the ruling party, I argue that public media have seen genocide from conflicting and complex angles, making it difficult to reach a consensus suitable for national building based on genocide truths, meanings and effects to Zimbabweans. I specifically use the Unity Accord-associated holiday, the Unity Day, and its associated debates to pursue two arguments. First, public media have played an ambiguous role in appreciating the conflictual and multi-pronged nature of the genocide within ZANU-PF. Second, public media have largely been supportive of, and even complicit in, official silences on genocide debates and memory. The article uses public sphere and narrative analysis as frameworks for understanding the operations of public media journalism in the mediation of genocide nearly 30 years after its occurrence.

### **Keywords**

Genocide

Zimbabwe

public media

official silence

national identity

violence

## **Introduction**

When Zimbabwe gained its independence in 1980 the most urgent assignment for the victorious Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) political elite was consolidation of power through the creation of a one-party state. This was done under the assumption that the struggle against colonialism had created a cohesive people-as-a-nation called Zimbabweans. Therefore, the national reconciliation project meant to incorporate whites as well as blacks into the new nation was ignored in favour of the creation of a functional party state (Kriger 2003). Two main challenges presented themselves in the newly independent state. White people's receptivity and 'readiness to confront the crisis of identity awaiting them' became a challenge as some Rhodesians 'had favoured the continuation of European privilege...' (Fisher 2010: 23). Another challenge was bringing together into one nation two main ethnic groups, the Ndebele and the Shona (comprising about 16 per cent and 80 per cent of the Zimbabwean population, respectively), who were burdened by historical ethnic animosities dating from the nineteenth century. There was an error of judgement on the nationalists' part as they believed in 'the misconceived notion that the liberation war

automatically created a nation' (Mpofu 2013: 116) out of an ethnically diverse society characterized by the simmering 'danger of an outburst of tribal feeling' (Shamuyarira 1965: 185; Sithole [1957–1979] 1980).

The project of carving a formidable and cohesive nation state from these acrimonious ethnic groups resulted in the employment of grotesque violence that affected the predominantly IsiNdebele-speaking people and their inhabited areas of central and south-west Zimbabwe, whose effects still colour ethnic relations, national identity and the political landscape. Through evidence from state-controlled public-owned media, the media that carry the official voice of the ZANU-PF, I argue that state-controlled public media have seen genocide from conflicting and complex angles, making it difficult to reach a consensus on genocide truths, meanings and effects for Zimbabweans. I specifically use the Unity Accord-associated holiday, the Unity Day, and its associated debates to pursue two arguments. First, state-controlled public media have played an ambiguous role in appreciating the conflictual and multi-pronged nature of the genocide within ZANU-PF. Second, the public media have largely been supportive of, and even complicit in, official silencing of genocide debates and memory. The genocide has been covered, to different extents, by a broad range of media like magazines, privately owned media and online media. Due to space constraints I limit myself to state-owned public media. Elsewhere in an article 'When the subaltern speaks: citizen journalism and genocide "victims" voices online' (Mpofu 2015). I looked at how new media were employed in the discussions and in empowering with a voice those members of the community affected by the genocide. The role of privately owned media, even though not covered in this article, remains a vital project to be pursued. So, to clarify, what this article is doing is looking at how state-controlled but public-owned media continue to mediate the

1980s genocide. What it is not doing is looking at how alternative media – i.e. online and privately owned media – are mediating the 1980s genocide.

The staging grounds for this genocide have remained key *leux de memoires* of this genocide more than the liberation war. The centrality of place as a discursive site is important as genocide debates encompass issues relating to ethnicity, development, marginalization and governability. Gukurahundi, the code name for genocide, is a Shona term, which literally means the early rains that wash away the chaff after harvest. In other contexts it simply means washing away rubbish. The term is used in two senses: first, to refer to the Fifth Brigade militia that carried out the genocide or the perceived intentions of the violence, and second the deliberate attempt to exterminate the predominantly Ndebele peoples of the Matabeleland and Midlands regions. These regions were affected in dissimilar ways and this was seemingly informed by the levels of support held by the opposition Zimbabwe African People's Union-Patriotic Front (PF-ZAPU) in those areas (Msindo 2012). The genocide left well in excess of 20,000 civilians dead (Muzondidya 2009, 2008; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009; Alexander et al. 2000). In most elections people from these regions have tended to vote against ZANU-PF in what is commonly known as 'protest voting' in some instances. Mugabe's spokesperson writing in *The Herald* (Anon. 2014c) has rightly argued that there are certain political leaders, especially opposition nationally or from Matabeleland and the Midlands, who own the 'so-called Gukurahundi' narrative, which has become an 'investment of unfailing dividend'. The genocide is equally used by ZANU-PF and opposition movements in different measures for political advancements.

There are varied versions of 'truths' both in the official and in the alternative public spheres about the genocide. President Mugabe in 1999 described the massacres as a moment of

madness that should never be repeated while the recently appointed vice president of Zimbabwe, Phelekezela Mphoko, a man accused of selling out his ZIPRA counterparts during the liberation war when he diverted weapons to ZANLA (some of which found their way to the South African intelligence and later to the colonial Rhodesian Selous Scouts), said the genocide was ‘a conspiracy of the West’ (Anon. 2015). Both statements are problematic because they attempt to promote silence at the expense of truth and healing that victims yearn for. ZANU-PF’s dominant narrative on the genocide as advanced by state-controlled media is replete with contradictions that largely mirror intra-party ideological and ethnic tensions characterizing the country’s unstable multidirectional nationalist project. ZANU-PF’s narrative at one point seeks to remember and at another forget the human rights violations of the 1980s’ genocide, thereby straining relationships between the state and survivors. What remains, however, is that these human rights violations have had implications in society: configuring ethnic relations, especially solidifying Ndebele particularism. Besides, the reverberations of the genocide induced fear and collective anxiety for individual survivors, perpetrators and bystanders. This fear is palpable in contemporary Zimbabwe because the people have not forgotten and the perpetrator still commands the organs of violence – the army and the police.

This study addresses the following questions: What does Gukuruhundi mean to ZANU-PF in a context when its political legitimacy is under strain? What role have the state-controlled public media played in the coverage of the genocide-related Unity Accord holiday? What does the cultural nationalism accompanying the Unity Day commemorations reveal about the internal make-up of ZANU-PF.? To answer these questions the article uses journalistic reportage and debates from ZANU-PF as covered in the public-owned media to illustrate that perspectives on genocide are characterized by conflicting angling of stories making its

meanings to the current Zimbabwe circuitous. Walter Benjamin (1974) famously remarked that it is the winners who get to write history. Since capturing the state at independence in 1980, ZANU-PF has used public-owned media to shape what Zimbabweans know, remember, think and forget about the genocide. The public-owned media that are the focus of this research are *The Herald*, *The Chronicle*, *The Sunday News* and *The Sunday Mail*. They fall under the Zimbabwe Stock Exchange-listed company, Zimbabwe Newspapers (Zimpapers 1980) Ltd, and 51 per cent of the shares are controlled by the state on behalf of the public. Technically, the public is the majority shareholder, and as the custodian of public power in the Zimpapers the ZANU-PF government has abused its powers such that it appoints the board of governors and editors and influences the coverage of issues. The way these narrate the nation falls neatly into a position that secures ZANU-PF's place, justifies its behaviours and absolves the ruling party from any responsibility for the genocide.

In the first part of the article I briefly historicize the Gukurahundi genocide before reviewing the literature on genocide. The same section proceeds to discuss the role of media as important institutions in conflict with a potential to prevent or exacerbate it. The latter part of the article is on the official public media and how they have reported on the genocide between 2000 and 2014. This period is important because it is the era when the genocide debates became more pronounced for many reasons, the most important of which were the fragility of ZANU-PF's nationalism, growing mass dissent and the empowerment people gained through new media as organizational and alternative communicative tools to resist ZANU-PF's flawed and yet dominant political discourses.

### **Gukurahundi genocide: What happened?**

Alleged dissident activities in the Midlands and Matabeleland regions between 1982 and 1987 prompted Mugabe into deploying a mainly Shona-speaking crack military outfit called the 'Fifth Brigade' to hunt the dissidents. The Fifth Brigade, an army trained and 'traumatized' by North Korean soldiers, operated as an independent unit from the structures of the national army and directly reported to the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Forces, Prime Minister Robert Mugabe. When the genocide was underway those outside the regions of Matabeleland and Midlands did not know what was going on due to a media blackout by ZANU-PF. They were told that the government was dealing with 'dissidents'. In 1983 the Catholic Archbishop, Karlen, wrote to Mugabe protesting about what he labelled 'genocide' in the Matabeleland and Midlands regions. Mugabe responded harshly, calling the Catholic priests 'a band of Jeremiahs with a band of foreign journalists "who were silent on the" heinous actions of ZAPU and its dissidents' (Msindo 2012: 213). No one could grasp the intensity of the state terror then until the 1997 publication of the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace and the Legal Resources Foundation genocide report. The seminal text of Alexander et al. on *Violence & Memory* (2000) gives the perspectives of former Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) men who took to the bushes after failing to integrate into the new Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA) citing tribalism, racism and favouritism among other things.

After the liberation war the competing Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and the ZIPRA forces (armed elements of ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU, respectively) were supposed to be demobilized and integrated into the ZNA. However, historians suggest that most ZIPRA soldiers surrendered their arms and went to demobilization camps known as Assembly Points (APs) while ZANLA soldiers did not comply with this Lancaster House Agreement cease-fire clause and remained largely 'unreliable, ill-disciplined and

unpredictable' (Alexander et al. 2000: 182). Because of disgruntlements, some ZIPRA soldiers left the APs with their arms. Thereafter there were reports of banditry elements terrorizing farmers and killing tourists and villagers. According to Laakso (1999: 68) 'some ex-guerrillas of ZIPRA... joined the dissidents or the so called super-ZAPU in protest against ZANLA leadership in the army ...'. The informants of Alexander et al. (2000) argue that they never intended to overthrow the Mugabe regime. Most dissidents argued that 'the life-threatening pressures of what they called "the situation" and their abandonment by their leaders, who were often in jail or actively disassociated themselves from and condemned their activities' (Alexander et al. 2000: 192), forced them into dissident activities. Some of those who did not escape were killed or endured ill treatment as part of the ZNA. The dissidents posed a threat to national security, and in reaction Mugabe expelled ZAPU members from the government and tried to 'prevent ZAPU's activities [and operations] as a legal political party' (Laakso 1999: 70). Some researchers suggest that ZANU-PF committed some 'dissident' activities and attributed these to ZIPRA forces (Msindo 2012; CCJP and LRF 1997; Todd 2007). While the South African-sponsored Super-ZAPU and the dissidents committed some atrocities, research suggests that the government, particularly through the Fifth Brigade and Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO), was responsible for over 90 per cent of the reported cases (Eppel 2008; CCJP and LRF 1997; Alexander et al. 2000; Msindo 2012).

However, blame was laid on PF-ZAPU and immediately Mugabe and ZANU-PF Members of Parliament suggested that Nkomo's soldiers wanted to destabilize the ZANU-PF government and they were 'dissidents' – a politically loaded term protested by Nkomo who preferred to call these elements 'bandits', 'lawless', 'out-laws' 'renegades', 'unruly elements', etc. (Alexander et al. 2000; Msindo 2012). Mugabe argued that 'ZANU is irretrievably bent on its



criminal path... time has now come for us to show this evil party our teeth. We can bite, and we shall bite' (Saul and Saunders 2004: 958). This statement and subsequent violent attempts at exterminating ZAPU and its supporters have continued to haunt Mugabe and ZANU-PF's political fortunes in genocide-affected regions. This is so especially because the attempt to quell these disturbances assumed both a genocidal and ethno-political form. Ethnicity became a marker for dissidence: that is, being Ndebele meant being a PF-ZAPU supporter and this inflated into being a dissident. The Matabeleland and Midlands parts of Zimbabwe became the centre of an attempt at creating a cohesive nation state through the grotesque method of violence, itself an inheritance from colonialism and liberation war based on a narrow belief that nationalism in the post-colony meant elimination of difference.

### **Literature review: Genocide and the media**

Scholarship on violence, of which genocide is a part, has attracted controversy bordering on definitional crises, theoretical and methodological questions that violence as a field of study has been encumbered with (Kapteijns and Richters 2010; Donham 2006). Huttenbach (1999: 167) argues that genocide studies lack 'both a satisfactory conceptual definition and a consensus as to the inner make-up of genocide... the search for an adequate definition can often lead to greater confusion and even controversy, bitterly divisive at times'. Robben and Nordstrom (1995: 12) are anxious of the possibility of representing violence in writing, as attempting to resolve violence in narrative makes it lose its 'absurdity and incomprehensibility; paradoxically the very qualities that we would like to convey'.

The difficulties in engaging on discourses on violence become apparent as:

In peeling back the layers of the many realities that impinge on this question of what violence is, we find that even the most horrific acts of aggression do not stand as

isolated exemplars of a 'thing' called violence but cast ripples that configure lives in the most dramatic of ways, affecting constructs of identity in the present, the hopes and potentialities of the future, and even renditions of the past. (Robben and Nordstrom 1995: 5 in Kapteijns and Richters 2010: 4)

There is, however, an approach that we could use to study violence despite definitional and methodological hurdles. Robben and Nordstrom rightly point out that:

Violence is a dimension of living. Attempts to apply equations of rationality or irrationality or to adjudicate violent events as meaningful or meaningless are beside the point because they are based on the misguided assumption that violence should be understood in terms of its function and objective. Violence may be carried out with logical precision, which does not make it reasonable, and is imbued with meaning, even though often emotionally senseless. Our search is not for cause and function but for understanding and reflexivity. (in Kapteijns and Richters 2010: 4)

While the article touches on the possible causes, which I call the three theses of the genocide, my main agenda here is to reflect and understand how ZANU-PF has, for political reasons, silenced and skewed genocide debates. This article reflects on selective official silences and memories of and on the Gukurahundi genocide. The official silence by the perpetrators and treatment of open genocide deliberations as a risky occupation have made it difficult to come up with the 'truth'. This official silence amplifies certain underlying tensions born out of the genocide.

Since the end of the genocide there has been a growing body of research on this previously taboo area of academic enquiry. The CCJP and LHR (1997) report was path breaking as it confronted ZANU-PF with well-documented evidence of suffering caused by the genocide. Anthropologists Worby (1998) and Werbner (1991, 1998) have done some seminal work too on the genocide. Alexander et al. (2000), just like CCJP and LHR (1997), undertook an extensive research that documented witnesses' and victims' accounts. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009) and Msindo (2012) have also made tremendous contributions that shift away from celebratory texts that characterized the formative years of new Zimbabwe nationalism. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009) partly attributes lack of national cohesion and a distinctly Zimbabwean national identity to the genocide. Similarly, Msindo (2012) and Muzondidya (2009) agree that the genocide engendered a sense of alienation from the nation and ethnic particularism among the Ndebele community of Zimbabwe, leading to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009) questioning the existence of 'Zimbabweans' as a nation. Again the Ndebele ethnic group is itself composed, just like the Shona, of sub-ethnic groups, some of which do not subscribe to certain aspects advocated for by some Ndebele pressure groups and ideologies. Mpfu quotes a discussant in an online debate on issues of belonging and the Mthwakazi mythic state as saying about the latter's agenda for secession:

[...] if Ndebele want their own state, Kalangas we will want ours too. The Kalanga people we will oppose your Mthwakazi state. We are not the dissidents of Mzilikazi or Lobengula. Zuma is in power so you guys, could easily negotiate to be moved back to kzn. Matebeleland belongs to the Kalanga people [*sic*]. (2014a: 273)

Historically, according to Mpfu (2014a: 274) Kalangas have always resisted Ndebele domination fearing, as Msindo (2012) reports, losing their language, identity and culture. On

the whole, the Ndebele ethnic group seem unified on the memory of Gukurahundi, whose memory is used as a site of resistance, resentment and expression of multiple grievances towards Shona triumphalism, domination and national identity. As such, scholars have agreed that this period informs questions on governance, identity, development and politics in Matabeleland and Midlands regions (Msindo 2012; Mpofu 2014a, 2014b; Muzondidya 2009; Eppel 2008; Mhlanga 2012). This study adds a new dimension to this literature by questioning the role of state-controlled media and its mediation of the genocide between 2000 and 2015.

What makes discussions on Gukurahundi genocide more problematic is that there have not been official attempts to address this episode as happened through truth commissions in South Africa and Rwanda that address apartheid and ethnic genocide, respectively, just to mention examples closer to Zimbabwe. There are three possible reasons for Gukurahundi: some argue that it was an ethnic war meant to exterminate Ndebeles from the face of the land while others argue that it was caused by South Africa's sponsorship of Super ZAPU to destabilize the newly independent state. The third explanation is that it was an attempt by Mugabe to create a one-party state and therefore he had to get rid of his opponents and supporters (Laakso 1999; Kriger 2003; Masunungure 2006). Besides, official silence, denial of culpability and refusal to allow open engagements on the issue by ZANU-PF have been a source of pain to most victims, leading to formulations of 'perceptions that their plight is unacknowledged' (CCJP and LRF 1997: 3) and advancing ethnicity as the main reason for instituting Gukurahundi. The Gukurahundi genocide that occurred during Zimbabwe's formative years has probably been one of the most enduring dark periods and continues to pose headaches on the national identity project to this day. This is true when one considers

the net effect of Gukurahundi as partly the creation of a pan-Ndebele particularism. Further, Msindo suggests that the Gukurahundi violence:

left lasting impressions, perhaps more permanent than the liberation war, as it was accompanied by wicked, unimaginable activities that shell-shocked the whole of western Zimbabwe [...]. The violence suffered by the peoples of Matabeleland forged an inseparable alliance between Ndebele identity and politics. Being Ndebele became both a political and linguistic expression. (Msindo 2012: 228)

The Fifth Brigade was understood to be both political and tribal in nature; it was mostly composed of Shona-speaking militias, and the two regions they operated in were predominantly Ndebele (Blair 2003; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009; Meredith 2007; Muzondidya 2009), giving credence to arguments that it was targeted at ethnic Ndebeles. The aim here is not to mystify or de-mystify these but to map how this episode continues to shape national identity debates in the current Zimbabwe. In addition, the net result of this genocide as already intimated is that it ‘not only left deep scars among the victims but also intensified Matabeleland regionalism’ (Muzondidya 2009: 177). Björn Lindgren suggests another narrative about the long-term ramifications of the genocide:

people in Matabeleland responded by accusing Mugabe, the government and the ‘Shona’ in general of killing Ndebele. That is, the period after independence, and especially the atrocities carried out by the Fifth Brigade, heightened the victims’ awareness of being Ndebele at the cost of being Zimbabwean (or, for that matter, of being of Nguni or any other origin). Further, since the publication in 1997 of the

Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace's report on the atrocities (CCJP/LRF 1997), the discourse on the Fifth Brigade's violence has been publicly voiced in Zimbabwe to new generations of Zimbabweans, which has both strengthened and spread feelings of Ndebeleness in southern Zimbabwe. (2005: 144)

It is undeniable therefore that this violence 'considerably affected Shona-Ndebele relations and continues to do so' (Msindo 2012: 211) in contemporary Zimbabwe. Thus, postcolonial Zimbabwe remains under identity stress, mainly because the difficult process of nation state formation went wrong from independence (Mpofu 2013). Despite all these attempts to establish a one-party state in the first decade of independence, ZANU-PF continued to face strong resistance from its opponents or state organs like the judiciary and its Members of Parliament like Sidney Malunga, Edgar Tekere, Lazarus Nzarayebani and Byrone Hove among others.

The media, especially broadcasting, have been Africa's foremost force of social development, political mobilization and change (Kalyango and Vultee 2012), and they are the arena where the battle of the hearts and minds of the populace takes place. In addition, as public spheres where people engage in a battle of ideas the media are supposed to be inclusive of divergent viewpoints. There is ample evidence to suggest the central role the media play in conflict. With reference to Rwanda, Buckley-Zistel (2006), Mamdani (1996), Kalyango and Vultee (2012) and Dorman et al. (2007) concur that the media had deleterious effects in the escalation of violence and hate speech. To illustrate the potency of media in anchoring destructive nationalisms Dorman et al. (2007: 12) state that 'state controlled media provided a "Twenty-four Hours Hate" to mobilise the "Hutu nation's" citizens'. Zimbabwean state-controlled media have played a pernicious role in covering violence at different epochs,

especially when perpetrated by the current government. In most cases the relationship between the media and the protagonists in conflict and the amount of influence imposed by the political and economic elite bear an influence in coverage of conflict.

The silencing of the media and inflammatory coverage of the dissident activities especially in *The Chronicle* in the 1980s justified and exacerbated Mugabe's heavy-handed approach towards the 'dissidents' by concealing the brutalities from global spectacle. Thus, the role of *The Chronicle* and of the state-controlled broadcaster Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) shifted from the supposed chronicler or witness of events to participants mobilizing public opinion towards a certain form of extreme nationalist ideology. This approach to conflict by the media is not isolated as demonstrated by Kingsley Moghalu, who sums up the role of the media in the Rwandan genocide in the following way:

These ominous events were fuelled by the influence of anti-Tutsi hate propaganda spewed by the Radio Television Libre des MillesCollines (RTLM) and Kangura newspaper, and the militarisation and transformation of youth wings of the main Hutu political parties... In its broadcasts, RTLM claimed that the RPF's agenda was to restore Tutsi hegemony and wipe out the benefits of the 1959 social revolution. It called for attacks against all Tutsis in Rwanda, who were branded accomplices of the invading RPF. (2005: 16)

Far afield from Zimbabwe, Ethiopian media offer another case study for the roles of media in conflict. In the 1998 conflict with Eritrea, the Ethiopian government employed politicians to man the broadcasters and spread propaganda about the conflict that claimed over 100,000

lives. Broadcasts incited anti-Eritrean sentiments while draconian media laws were used to shut those media that were critical of the status quo. In most conflicts, the recent being Kenya in 2007, ethnicity or identity plays a major part. Difference is treated as anathema to nation-making. Most ruling political movements in Africa advocate for the mantra that for a nation to subsist the tribe must die. The possibility of celebrating ethnicity and using it as a contributing resource to the larger nation is frowned upon. The next section forms the pith of this article and addresses public-owned media coverage of the Gukurahundi genocide nearly three decades after it ended. It specifically uses the Unity Accord holiday as a locus of focus. This day is at the centre of remembering and at the same time forgetting this atrocious past.

### **Mediating genocide: Silence, forgetting and remembering**

Unity Day in Zimbabwe was born out of the signing of the Unity Accord on 22 December 1987 between ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU in an attempt to end further spilling of blood in the affected regions, unmake the ethnic divisions, and cobble a notion of national identity based on civic identities rather than ethnic ones. This led to a merger of the two parties forming ZANU-PF. The Unity Accord terms were largely favourable to ZANU-PF and emasculated PF-ZAPU as an equal partner in the coalition in the process. This is captured by Saul Ndlovu when he writes ‘The practical core of that accord is to accommodate PF-ZAPU at two levels: Government level in the person or office of the Second Vice-President, and at political party level in the person or office of the national chairman of ZANU-PF’ (Anon. 2014d). The holiday has been a conspicuous symbol of silencing, forgetting and remembering the genocide. Memory is a complex process whereby people choose to remember certain episodes over others. In so doing, the ordering of the remembered episodes, and the positioning and hierarchy given to the issues, is complex and subjective. In dealing with Gukurahundi and Unity Day ZANU-PF has largely asserted itself as an ambiguous agent of



amnesia, remembering and unity at the same time. What follows below is an exploration of how the public-owned media in the form of *The Chronicle*, *The Herald* and *The Sunday Mail* have covered news surrounding the genocide with specific reference to the Unity Day.

Unity Day discourses in state-controlled media are underpinned by the narratives of the liberation struggle with an emphasis on unity while ignoring the genocide, its effects and possible ways to gain closure especially in the face of mass dissent from mostly aggrieved Matabeleland and Midlands residents. Thus, the coverage in the public-owned media is conspicuously silent on the genocide's historical and contextual backgrounds. For instance, an analysis by Caesar Zvayi in the following extract from *The Herald* newspaper fails to provide a contextualized history of the day. He writes:

Zimbabweans from all walks of life mark [the] 19th anniversary of National Unity Day, as a public holiday... to mark the signing of Unity Accord between the country's two revolutionary parties, ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU... The two parties, that represented the entirety of the Zimbabwean populace, put pen to paper on December 22 1987 in Harare ensuring the peace and stability the country revels in today. It was not difficult for the two parties to unite as they shared common ideals and objectives to ensure that Zimbabweans enjoyed the fruits of independence without undue hindrance from outsiders. Indeed, the suffix/prefix PF in the party names denoted a history of shared values that saw them coming together to form the Patriotic Front in the late 1970s... (Anon. 2006a)

The media are powerful in suppressing certain 'divisive' sentiments and this comes out clearly from the above quote. Instead of revealing the historical background of the Unity Day,

*The Herald* chooses to frame it within the dominant ZANU-PF narrative that celebrates unity and in the process ignores socio-politico-economic needs of the victims and their families, such as decent burial, truth and reconciliation or reparations so that the dead may rest in peace as per African customary beliefs and the living may find closure. The public-owned media use a single-story narrative that is politically expedient to ZANU-PF when covering the reverberations of the 1980s genocide. Unity Day commemorations are treated like birthdays in a typically conservative African cultural setting where the graphic details of one's conception and birth are never addressed. But what is remembered is only the fact that they were born. Zimbabweans are not told the reasons for celebrating Unity Day or that it came about after the commitment of heinous crimes against humanity in which the state was the aggressor.

The public-owned media have been complicit in their uncritical coverage of ZANU-PF's silencing of the voices of those who want to engage on the issue. The late former deputy president John Nkomo's (2009–2013) comments in the following extract are illustrative:

[...] those who talk about it were never victims or were born yesterday and are too young to comprehend what happened and why. President Mugabe came to Bulawayo when we were over that period with the late Vice President Joshua Nkomo and we all went to Brethren-In-Christ Church here in town and he said it was a moment of madness. They agreed with Umdala uNkomo that it should be a closed chapter. It was indeed a regrettable period in our country [...] people must be made to appreciate that in any political situation, people might lose their lives [...] We have to accept that where there are human tribulations, such things happen. Let's [...] remember that what happened is history and we can't reverse it. (Anon. 2011b)

John Nkomo represents the PF-ZAPU factor in ZANU-PF, and his sentiments are not representative of most of those who supported PF-ZAPU before the Unity Accord. The PF-ZAPU elite that joined the coalition government with ZANU-PF treated remembering the genocide as an injustice to the present while forgetting that, similarly, forgetting it was an injustice even to the past. But one may be persuaded to understand the approach of the PF-ZAPU members involved in the elite pact with ZANU-PF in that, as British journalist David Rieff suggests, ‘remembrance may be the ally of justice, but it is no reliable friend to peace, whereas forgetting can be’ (Anon. 2016). Joshua Nkomo was disturbed by the publication of the CCJP Gukurahundi Report and his reaction accentuates political elites’ attempts to overwrite dissent in preference of silence on the genocide. It is said that Nkomo

[...] apparently stormed into the CCJP offices demanding that all copies (of the atrocities report) should be handed over to him [...]. [He] berated the staff in Ndebele warning them of the danger to national unity of publication. (*Zimbabwe Independent*, 9 May 1997 in Werbner 1998: 96, emphasis added)

Mpofu (2014a: 172) observes that

Nkomo’s use of force here is synonymous with Zanu-Pf’s attempts to institutionally dominate the discursive field of national identity and force debates to follow certain trajectories that do not impede the dominant discourses. The suspicion that discussing genocide may make ‘one become a target of political violence or human rights violations [has] permeated all aspects of life and caused great anguish’. (Barbera 2009: 72) and has promoted silence in Zimbabwe 30 years after independence.

[Therefore] people have to forget for the sake of unity and as an expression of patriotism.

Interestingly the PF-ZAPU elite did not hold consistent views (and still do not) on remembering and forgetting the genocide, and it appears they ‘forgot’ the genocide while within ZANU-PF only to remember when some of them broke away to re-form ZAPU in 2009 led by former PF-ZAPU intelligence supremo, Dumiso Dabengwa.

Official pronouncements like those of Mphoko, John and Joshua Nkomo above preserve places in or near the power of those Ndebele political elites that went into the coalition representing PF-ZAPU and to a certain extent its supporters, most of whom were victims of genocide, while also advantaging ZANU-PF as a ruling party in that what it says is usually taken as the official position that cannot be contested. Besides Mugabe’s assertion that the genocide was a moment of madness, if assertions from Jonathan Moyo when he was expelled from ZANU-PF and became an independent MP for Tsholotsho are to be relied upon, Mugabe speaks through his spokesperson, George Charamba, who has run a column, *On the Other Side*, in *The Herald*, under the pen name Natahaniel Manheru, to debate issues including the genocide. Moyo says, ‘Charamba’s inflammatory tribalism would ordinarily go unnoticed but for the fact that he is Mugabe’s trusted and loyal personal spokesperson with no track record of ever holding independent opinions. Charamba speaks for Mugabe. Put differently, Mugabe speaks through Charamba’ (Moyo, 11 December 2009). According to Charamba, the ‘so-called’ Gukurahundi genocide is just some ‘disturbances which affected some parts of Matabeleland and Midlands... until the 1987 Unity Accord cured them’ (*The Herald* (Anon. 2014c)). If Moyo’s assertions that Charamba’s sentiments are Mugabe’s are to be taken seriously, then there is an official underplaying of the magnitude of the genocide.

ZANU-PF has consistently used violence to deal with dissent, including against those who engage in Gukurahundi debates or who hold memorial services or try to engage with its trauma through art and other cultural activities. During the 2009–2013 Government of National Unity between ZANU-PF and two formations of the MDC, the Global Political Agreement provided a provision for the Ministry of National Healing and Reconciliation. ZANU-PF used its political muscle to silence people, even cabinet ministers for that ministry. Minister and MDC MP Moses Mzila-Ndlovu and Father Marko Mnkandla, a catholic priest, were arrested for attending a memorial service for the genocide victims in Lupane. The use of State Repressive Apparatus like the police and army to curtail debates and commemorations has negatively affected community cohesion, participation in and networks of protest since the 1980s. The potential effectiveness of such protests or networks has been systematically dismantled to an extent that people fear to be protagonists in major political activities that affect their lives (Barbera 2009).

Besides a consistent effort from ZANU-PF to forcibly make people forget genocide and interfere with memorial services or any attempts to find ‘spiritual’ connection and closure of the same, ZANU-PF is here suppressing ethnic rituals and particularism in favour of national unity. Similar tactics have been used before; for instance, in 1997 the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) allegedly stopped villagers from erecting a headstone with victims’ names on a mass grave in a memorial commemoration of the Fifth Brigade victims in Lupane (Werbner 1998). Due to fear, the community obliged and the only inscription on the headstone at the end of the day was that day’s date. In short, when people are ‘trapped in the fear of fear’ (Ibacache et al. in Barbera 2009: 75) and terrors of remembering and forgetting

they end up not knowing the demarcations between what is safe and dangerous to discuss and commemorate where ‘ticklish’ (Mhlanga 2012) cultural issues are involved.

Contemporary debates on national belonging suggest that contrary to the myth that the Unity Day ‘was in the interest of the people and not of the two political parties’ (Anon. 2013a) or that it ‘was home-grown [...]. Agreement between Zimbabweans themselves’ (Anon. 2012) meant ‘to bury the hatchet and launch the beginning of a new era’ (Anon. 2011a) has been subject to contestations from various quarters within Zimbabwe and in the diaspora (Mpofu 2014a, 2014b). Those contesting the Unity Day argue it was an elite pact that led to ZANU-PF swallowing PF-ZAPU leading to the continuation of the segregation of the Midlands and Matabeleland regions, exacerbating feelings of alienation among the Ndebele people (Mpofu 2013, 2014a). These feelings of alienation have led some pressure groups like the *Mthwakazi Liberation Front*, *Imbovane Yamahlabezulu*, *Vukani Mahlabezulu* and *ZAPU 2000* among others calling for secession (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009; Mpofu 2014a). Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s book, *Do Zimbabweans exist?* (2009), dismantles the taken-for-granted perception that ‘The Unity Accord solidified and formalised that we are one’ (Anon. 2013a). People who contest the abuse and dismiss the relevance of the Unity Accord to ordinary Zimbabweans are labelled ‘mad’ (Anon. 2013a) or dismissed as ‘detractors who are sponsored by the same inimical forces that sustained the dissidents, want Zimbabweans to forget that the dissidents were an Apartheid South Africa and Rhodesian project’ (Anon. 2006a).

In some cases they are also branded as agents of the West and a threat to unity as demonstrated by the following quotation from *The Herald* newspaper:

The unity among Zimbabweans has been constantly attacked by the country's detractors and those who want to manipulate its people. Western nations, particularly Britain are now employing some devious means of dividing Zimbabweans by creating and funding opposition political parties. The funded opposition political parties such as the MDC are often dangerous and are bent on dividing the people on tribal lines. The British sponsored violence in the country by funding the MDC to embark on mass protests soon after the presidential election last year. (Anon. 2003)

The state-controlled media do not question ZANU-PF's posturing as the only legitimate party to rule Zimbabwe based on its liberation war credentials. The underlying perception is that the Unity Accord was signed on behalf of all Zimbabweans and therefore there is no space for opposition parties contesting ZANU-PF's legitimacy. The dismissal of other political formations with policies contrary to those of ZANU-PF is an attempt to maintain hegemony and ZANU-PF's ideologies on cultural nationalism. These narratives on the Unity Accord, its relevance and the meanings of 'unity' in state-controlled media fail to capture the day's essence especially in a politically polarized Zimbabwe and highly factionalized context.

In 2006 when the current ZANU-PF higher education and former information minister Jonathan Moyo was an independent Member of Parliament for Tsholotsho after his expulsion from ZANU-PF he wrote but never tabled in parliament the *Gukurahundi Memorial Bill* with, among other things, an intention of establishing a Gukurahundi National Memorial Board and Gukurahundi National Memorial shrine meant to 'promote lasting national cohesion, unity, truth, reconciliation, stability, conflict prevention and the permanent healing of emotive and divisive wounds' and criminalized any denialism of the genocide. *The Sunday Mail* reacted to this by suggesting that it was a plan 'to divide the country along tribal lines by sponsoring a

parliamentary Bill that analysts say is aimed at opening wounds of the political disturbances that occurred in Matabeleland and the Midlands in the 1980s'. The story further quotes an analyst saying:

He knows quite well that the Bill will not sail through but he is seeking to reopen wounds of that bad patch by institutionalizing the conflict. It is an attempt to abuse the parliamentary system to make up for his weak position as a solitary independent MP. Above all, the Bill is meant to project him as a champion of one ethnic group in the country, hoping to use that as a platform for his political future. (Anon. 2006b)

John Nkomo who was Speaker of Parliament then said about Moyo's Bill:

Even President Mugabe has acknowledged Gukurahundi as a time of madness, which must never be repeated, so that means government is in a position to redress what happened then without having to be bound by any bills... We must be careful when handling such issues because they affect the national unity symbolised by the unification of ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU into the united ZANU-PF we have today. Gukurahundi has always been steeped in tribal overtones pitting the Ndebele against the Shona, and no one wants to revisit such a divisive era. (Anon. 2007)

What is significant from the above is that ZANU-PF uses its political domination of the post-genocide era to control debates on national identity. The contradictory articulation of the genocide issue reveals discursive power imbalances that surround Gukurahundi and Unity Day within ZANU-PF. To highlight this, Werbner asserts that buried memory was and still is



‘Mugabe’s own demand. Ironically, he continues to call for forgetting the past where he most commemorates it’ (Werbner 1998: 96).

Even when a context of the genocide is provided in public-owned media stories there remains a lacuna, especially when such reportage undermines the excessive manner in which ZANU-PF attempted to deal with the dissident activities and the resultant trauma. The following extract helps demonstrate this assertion:

One of the most important moments in the history of Zimbabwe is 22 December 1987. That is the day when ZANU, led by President Mugabe and ZAPU, led by Vice-President Joshua Nkomo signed the Unity Accord to end civil disturbances in Matabeleland and parts of Midlands. On this day people will celebrate the importance of peace and unity in the country. This is the day which saw people who couldn’t drink tea together, become one, sharing a common goal, which is unity for the development of the country. (Anon. 2013b)

The Unity Accord was signed by Zanu and ZAPU in 1987. President Mugabe and the late Vice President Joshua Nkomo signed the Unity Accord in 1987 to bridge the tribal gulf that led to political disturbances in the Matabeleland region soon after independence. (Anon. 2009)

The historic 1987 agreement was signed to end division between the two revolutionary parties... [which] turned rivals and contested elections separately. The repercussion of such an arrangement saw anti-Zimbabwe elements from the former Rhodesian regime, with the support of Apartheid South Africa, spur dissent between

1980–1983... The resultant reaction to the dissent in Matabeleland led to Gukurahundi where the Government deployed forces to suppress the ensuing Turbulence. (Anon. 2014b)

In most stories it is the voices of the ZANU-PF officials that ventilate discussions on Unity Day and they speak from a politically expedient and taken-for-granted position that the public-owned media have failed to scrutinize. ZANU-PF politburo member Cephas Msipa asserts that ‘[T]he main aim of Unity Accord has been achieved- that is to make people of Zimbabwe feel that they are one regardless of any other differences that exist but we are one people’ (Anon. 2013). That the day is contested as demonstrated by research (Mpofu 2016) seems not to matter and this amounts to stripping citizens off any form of agency.

The only time the discourse in the public sphere gets closer to addressing the incomprehensible trail of trauma that is the legacy of the genocide is when it is referred to mildly as ‘Matabeleland and Midlands disturbances’ (Anon. 2006b), ‘differences’, ‘fighting’ (Anon. 2013), ‘political and civil conflicts within our nation’ (Anon. 2011a), ‘turbulence’ (Anon. 2014), or as Mugabe said ‘a moment of madness that should never be repeated’ (Mpofu 2014) or as reported by *The Herald* while quoting Mugabe, “‘Along the way there was fighting. It is regretted”, referring to post-independence disturbances in Matabeleland and Midlands regions. “We re-united ourselves and reminded ourselves that we are one people. There is need for us not to let go on the land [...]” (Anon. 2008).

From the above, it is clear that ZANU-PF and Mugabe with the public media playing a complicit role are uncomfortable in addressing the genocide issue in its entirety and this

informs the use by ordinary citizens of social media and other alternative fora to contest ZANU-PF's selective use of collective memory on the genocide. Contrary to Moyo's (2009: 62) argument that 'news is a great myth or ideology maker where journalists unconsciously act as the agents' it seems the public media deliberately play a complicit role by failing to critique the status quo. Again it seems public media journalists are consciously supporting ZANU-PF's versions of cultural nationhood and this is informed by the political economy of public media in Zimbabwe. Public media have narrated the story of unity in frames that legitimate and naturalize ZANU-PF's hegemony while downplaying the urgent need to address the 1980s excesses so as to create authentic unity that could be brought through an inclusive national healing project.

### **Genocide and tensions within ZANU-PF**

ZANU-PF's discourses regarding the genocide reflect intra-party tensions expressing themselves through ethnic and factional fault lines. ZANU-PF's top-down amnesia regarding Gukurahundi contrasts with its obsession with remembering the colonial injustices that are graphically described by Mugabe during Independence Day and Heroes Day or Defence Forces Day commemorations (Mpofu 2014: 2016). This unmasks ZANU-PF's fear and insecurity on sustaining legitimacy amidst intra-party tensions and dissent from some sections of society. However, internal conflicts regarding the genocide within ZANU-PF are devastating and expose cracks on ZANU-PF's homogeneity as a party. This is notable from two extracts below from the current vice president Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was Minister of State Security during the genocide, and Jonathan Moyo, respectively:

The unity accord is a symbol of national unity. It was a profound and decisive initiative meant to reconcile the two revolutionary parties, ZANU-PF and PF-

ZAPU. President Mugabe and Dr. Nkomo reached a consensus. There is really nothing that ZANU-PF needs to be open about now because Dr. Nkomo was also part of ZANU-PF.... We do not want to undermine efforts by our national leaders to reunite the people. If we try to open healed wounds by discussing such issues, we will be undermining and failing to recognise the statesmanship exhibited by President Mugabe and his counterpart, Dr Nkomo when they signed the Unity Accord in 1987. (Anon. 2011c)

The Gukurahundi issue is not a closed chapter. President Mugabe made a paradigmatic statement in 2000 when he described it as a moment of madness, which it indeed was, but there's nothing that has been done since 2000 to use that very important statement by the President to bring the matter to finality or closure. I strongly believe that only ZANU-PF can lead the process of bringing that matter to closure building on what President Mugabe said in 2000. And the party can do that by being willing to publicly engage the issue in an open, honest and non-defensive way, which has characterised our attitude thus far. That was a dark point in our history as an independent nation which not only involved dissidents who committed atrocities and wantonly destroyed property but also the State whose response to the dissident menace, which clearly had illegal and mercenary support and direction from apartheid South Africa, was so outrageously disproportionate as to cause unnecessary suffering among ordinary people which could have otherwise been avoided. (Anon. 2011d)

Clearly ZANU-PF does not have a consistent narrative on the genocide as whatever narratives are available are replete with contradictions and tensions. The Unity Day and Gukurahundi narrative seek at one point to remember and dis-member; and, at another, to forget the genocide, generating tension between ZANU-PF and victims or survivors. These tensions have burdened ZANU-PF's attempts at maintaining political legitimacy and building a hegemonic and cohesive brand of national identity. Like Renan (1990) in *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (What is a Nation?) Mnangagwa implores his countrymen to forget inauspicious episodes in the history of Zimbabwe as this is the basis for constructing a nation. As Renan (1990) said, the worst must be forgotten for the nation to subsist. While remembering can be the basis of soul searching, truth telling, healing and a way of gaining closure there are clashing arguments towards forgetting and the deliberate rewriting of history. One argument is that the best way to deal with the genocide is to find closure through open and direct dialogic confrontation with the violence while another is that 'it was a moment of madness' and people need to move on. But there is need to question who was mad? Why? What could be done to heal the madman and his victims!

From Mnangagwa's statement above it is not clear what is being forgotten but what is clear are the reasons for forgetting. He could be speaking on behalf of the state as a minister and also as someone who is largely responsible for the genocide, hence the need to assert himself as an agent of amnesia. Whereas the colonial memory has been used by ZANU-PF to consolidate national identity, the narrative of Unity Day alludes to 'the process of remembering [and becoming] selective, incorporating acts of forgetting' (Stewart 2000: 384) for political ends.

Mnangagwa's statement neglects to factor in the healing and the memory of those who were killed, while Moyo's statement suggests the need for truth telling, healing and closure. Again it is important to notice that Jonathan Moyo has never been an advocate for silence about the genocide, and his assertion that indeed this was a moment of madness is pointed. He has always undermined certain pronouncements by Mugabe on social media, and some sections of society have believed that he is in ZANU-PF to destroy the party. He wants the issue addressed as he too lost his father through this yet-to-be-addressed genocide. This neatly contrasts with the Rwandese case where the government of the day has held those responsible accountable through traditional courts called the *Gacaca*, and created memorial sites where genocide is memorialized and victims remembered. In so doing, national cohesion, justice, accountability and unity are fostered (Ibreck 2009). The temporal process of healing, forgetting and remembering does not only have to be an elite-driven project, as is the case in Zimbabwe, but has to include the living and the dead, victims and perpetrators acting and meeting at the same level.

It is important to point out that one cannot forget that which she or he does not remember; hence, this forgetting advocated by ZANU-PF is problematic as it is done outside remembering and the confines of a truth and reconciliation statutory body. It becomes 'negative heritage' (Bell in Zehfuss Maja 2006). Maja Zehfuss poignantly sums it up thus: '[A]lthough remembering and forgetting are clearly opposed to each other in debates over memory, and the former valued over the latter, they are inextricably linked: remembering always already entails forgetting and forgetting is possible only where there is remembering in the first place' (2006: 213).

This fear permeates the whole society as those fearful or those who hold the memory need not be direct victims of the genocide, but, as Rojas (1996: 63) argues (in Barbera 2009), all people (and even those who did not experience violence) ‘have... been submitted to the terror, the fear, the psychological manipulation, the human transfiguration’ of violence. This is also accentuated by one of Barbera’s (2009: 75) interlocutors in her article on memory in a Chilean Shantytown who says that memory of violence ‘leads [us] to continue to live in a constant state of internalised fear’.

## **Conclusion**

After a conflict it is important for societies to engage in situated unification and healing projects where all citizens may be able to recognize themselves. From the foregoing this research has demonstrated that history telling, remembrance, memory and narrating the nation are political projects that include a struggle over power and who gets to decide the future. Zimbabwe’s public media have largely played a subservient role in supporting and advancing ZANU-PFs agenda of nation-building through coercively controlling the narratives on Unity Day. The coverage of Unity Day renders state-controlled media ‘lapdogs’ of the ZANU-PF-dominated political system. In some instances such strategies as intimidation and labelling opponents of ZANU-PFs approaches to the Unity Day as internal enemies or sell-outs of the struggle being used by former colonists or other outside enemies of the state. Forgetting and insisting that the genocide was addressed by Mugabe’s statement that it was a moment of madness has been used to mask ethnic differences and tensions. This way of dealing with conflict only wishes it away but the fact remains that the hatchet was buried and a mark always lingers on, suggesting the possibility of ethnic implosion in the future. Even though not used in this research, there are a lot of dissenting voices against Unity Day in Zimbabwe and this means that there are some ‘Zimbabweans’ who see

themselves as outsiders to the nation after having experienced the genocide. Instead of insisting on ‘the moment of madness’ narrative in an attempt to create a politically correct national identity that denies the multi-ethnic mosaic as central to the creation of the nation there is need for an open dialogue where members of the community may share their thoughts, experiences and dreams.

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