

## **Making heroes, (un)making the nation?: ZANU-PF's imaginations of the Heroes Acre, heroes and construction of identity in Zimbabwe from 2000-**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the post 2000 national identity formation through the use of national heroes narrative and the Heroes' Acre shrine in Zimbabwe. The Heroes' Acre marks the country's physical reminder of the past and acts as a tool for national identity and its symbolic maintenance through state presided rituals that happen at the shrine. Attached to the Heroes' Acre as a permanent physical symbol of nationhood are the people the burial site was built for –the heroes, that is, the 'war' dead and the living who participated in the country's liberation 'war'. The argument made in this paper is that the definition and usages of heroes and Heroes' Acre has mutated over the years to suit ZANU-PF's shifting political agendas. Specifically the article addresses questions around conferment of a hero's status on the dead, access to the Heroes' Acre and the meanings of these to the emotive issue of nurturing a monolithic Zimbabwean national identity as imagined by ZANU-PF. The article concludes that the elite's uses of the Heroes' Acre and heroes' status which excludes democratic public participation has served to carve a skewed and narrow narrative on the meaning of Zimbabweanness meant to bolster ZANU-PF's hegemony. National identities, the article argues, are transient and always changing.

**Keywords:** heroes, Heroes' Acre, national identity, Zimbabwe, monuments

## Introduction

Some of the most potent signifiers of arrival of the new political elite in a postcolonial set-up usually brought about by a violent war of liberation are the renaming of significant landmarks, dismantlement of colonial monuments and the erection of new ones, representative of the new status quo. In Zimbabwe, the national Heroes' Acre stands imagined as one of the most symbolic monuments of prestige, overcoming, decolonisation, resilience, equality, democracy, legitimacy and influence. The Heroes' Acre marks the country's memory and history while standing as a physical reminder and tool for national identity formation and symbolic maintenance. Attached to the Heroes' Acre, as a permanent physical symbol of nationhood, is the people the burial site was built for, the 'war dead' and the living who participated in the 'war'. I prefer using 'war' rather than war because Zimbabwe has passed through many conflicts each with its own heroes. There are two main wars that have to do with the country's liberation called the First and Second *Chimurenga* (revolutionary struggles) wars in Shona. The Third and 'Fourth' *Chimurengas* are the land reform and economic reform 'wars' and it is these that have created dubious heroes who are also buried at the Heroes' Acre rendering both the term 'war' dead and 'heroes' as imagined by ZANU-PF complex. National heroes unlike myths, bring to life the belief that for the nation to subsist there were sacrifices and blood-shed. This makes the Heroes' Acre a celebratory and solemn space; where the heroic sacrifices of the dead are celebrated at a public burial and yet what they stood for, fought for and the current events, especially the post 2000 years are of solemn concern particularly to the ruling elite.

This paper questions the political elite's uses of the Heroes' Acre as a sacred national space, selection and burial of national heroes in the complex project of national identity construction. National identity in the context of this research is taken to mean "a shared structure of feeling, a largely imagined consciousness that is reinforced both through life's daily routines as well as through ritualised, symbol-laden, celebrations of nationhood" (Thomas 1996, 1). In the case of Zimbabwe it has been argued that there is nothing like a cohesive Zimbabwean national identity because Zimbabweans as a nation do not exist (Mpofu 2014, Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009, Masunungure 2005). This is simply predicated upon the fact that, among other things, even the name 'Zimbabwe' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009), and 'national' symbols were imposed on the national landscape without public or democratic participation. Thus the post-colonial

nationalists failed to ‘create’ the nation-as-a-people but instead succeeded in creating a ‘people-less’ state. What has been the prime issue for ZANU-PF since 2000 is what Bell (1999), writing in the Uzbek context, calls the re-definition of the hegemonic narrative on national identity. Heroes and the Heroes’ Acre have been the focal point and theatre for revivifying a ZANU-PF imagined Zimbabwean national identity.

The intention is not to dispute the definitions of heroes and Heroes’ Acre or national identities constructed around these but my quest is to critically examine interpretations and narratives around these while highlighting inconsistencies and implications they have on the mythic notion of Zimbabweanness. Elsewhere, in the article *Toxification of national holidays and national identity in Zimbabwe’s post-2000 nationalism*, I discuss the use of national holidays as Heroes’ Day and Independence Day as central to commemorative and national identity construction rituals (Mpfu 2016). The research focuses on how Zimbabwe’s President Robert Mugabe has adulterated and toxified these holidays and the notion of Zimbabweanness through commemorating and celebrating these auspicious days in an exclusivist and narrow fashion whose only project is the maintenance of Mugabe’s political legitimacy and stranglehold on power. The current research takes a different dimension altogether. It does not focus on the holidays *per se* but attempts to focus on the physical aspects on nation-making - the Heroes Acre as a symbolic space and the heroes as founders and ancestors of the mythic nation. I pay particular attention to the uses of the Heroes’ Acre and heroes’ narratives from Mugabe’s speeches and news reports as reported in *The Herald* between 2000-2015. Mugabe’s speeches form executive declarations on the socio-political and economic direction of the country while *The Herald* acts as a mouthpiece of the Mugabe government (Mpfu, 2016).

This period is significant as it is the period when President Mugabe’s ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), the party that has ruled Zimbabwe since 1980 faced a formidable opposition party in all elections for the second time since independence. In 1980 Nkomo’s Patriotic Front-Zimbabwe African People’s Union (PF-ZAPU) challenged Mugabe. The latter’s intolerance for opposition political parties, quest to make Zimbabwe a one party-state and alleged tribal-friction led to a genocide that ended in 1987 with the signing of the Unity Accord between ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU. The post 2000 is also significant in Zimbabwean politics as “it is characterised by political and economic crises that have assumed global prominence, including a tension filled and shaky Government of National Unity between ZANU-PF and the opposition parties between 2009 and 2013” (Mpfu 2016, 28). This period has seen national identity, monuments and national holidays being contested assuming a status

of objects of socio-political and economic conflicts. The heroes, the ‘controversial’ conferment of the hero status by ZANU-PF and eulogies usually given by Mugabe have spoken largely to the issues of national sovereignty and the sanctity of the country’s ruler-ship as a preserve solely for ZANU-PF.

### **National identity as a construct**

The understanding of Zimbabwe national identity in this paper draws from the constructivist school of nationalism espoused by theorists like Gellner (1983), Hobsbawm (1990), Anderson (1991), Hall (1996) among others. Constructionists see identity formation as a “construction, a process never completed—always in process” (Hall, 1996, 210). As Anderson (2006) captures some aspects of the role of capitalism in nation-formation in his seminal book, *Imagined Communities*, one can see that the wide belief is that nations are “relatively recent innovations tied to the rise of industrial capitalism, and that the states and elites actively create national identity around important symbolic events and ideas” (Forest and Johnson, 2002, 526). Using print capitalism to make his thesis, Anderson (2006) argues that the emergence and replication of the daily ritual of newspaper production and reading in some West European countries pointed to print capitalism’s role “in the historical constitution of nations as imagined communities” (Brookes, 1999, 248). Undeniably myths, drama and iconography (Duara, 1996) were not technologically circulated but these were orally circulated and the net effect was the same. Again, most postcolonial African states imagine their postcolonial nationhood along the lines of having had and having conquered a common enemy – the settler – as having created the nation-as-a-people.

National identities are fluid, contested and complex and therefore we cannot afford to take the citizens as passive consumers who when partaking or consuming elite produced ideologies or products become part of a community the elite imagines without contesting some of these ideologies. However, in this instance of politically controlled spaces where ordinary citizens cannot partake in any democratic engagement, this paper argues that there is a one-way constructionist approach to the debate; the elite controlled one. ZANU-PF controls and dominates the public media and the Heroes’ Acre as a national space and no alternative voices are advanced from those two public spaces. Sometimes citizens are frogmarched to the burials and other commemorative events at the Heroes’ Acre but they remain disempowered and at the margins of these rituals.

ZANU-PF for instance, even though with tendencies of primordially constructing Zimbabweanness when it is politically expedient, appeals to many as a modern party using modern means to construct the nation. But to do this, it derives political power and legitimacy from ancient myths, historical events and characters. A mythic, ancient and timeless Zimbabwe disrupted by colonialism in the late 1800s has been engaged with as imagined by ZANU-PF for its political survival. In this imagination, ZANU-PF's dominant discourses suggest that the party was inspired by the country's ancestors deliver independence in 1980. Most narratives therefore hinge on this imagination and this has opened up the Zimbabwean national identity to be a reflection of the choices made by the powerful political elite who choose "historical figures that become national heroes and establish the historical incidents that become the formative events of the nation's identity" (Forest and Johnson 2002, 526).

The Heroes' Acre's symbolic meaning and centrality to Zimbabwe-hood has been, to a certain extent, modified by ZANU-PF especially after 2000 so as to survive the changes in the political landscape outlined above. The Heroes' Acre has been one of the most important monuments, just like artefacts such as the liberation war heroes, whose memory has been used to construct a Zimbabwean national identity whose make-up and narratives, according to Verdery (1999), writing in a different context, invoke a sense of timelessness, awe, fear, and uncertainty. This usage of artefacts whose memories transcend time, bringing past events to the present, according to Forest and Johnson (2002, 526) "makes such objects especially effective in mobilizing national movements."

Finally, Bourdieu's (1990, 108) characterisation of what he calls "officialisation" where the political elite use their symbolic capital intimately linked to behaviours, practices and structures is instructive. He argues that officialisation is a process whereby a dominant group like ZANU-PF for instance "teaches itself and masks from itself its own truth, binds itself by a public profession which sanctions and imposes what it utters, tacitly defining the limits of the thinkable and unthinkable and so contributing to the maintenance of the social order from which it derives its power".

### **The public media and the national identity narrative**

In post- 2000 Zimbabwe debates on the Heroes' Acre and heroes have taken place mostly in the media. This article uses heroes and Heroes' Acre debates by ZANU-PF to demonstrate the fragility of ZANU-PF's national identity project. The public owned and state-controlled media

that always give ZANU-PF and President Mugabe's views on the nation and other subjects prominence have been instrumental in advancing ZANU-PF's narrow views on the liberation war, national identity, heroes and the Heroes' Acre as a national monument. They act as mouthpieces of the government of the day. To highlight this, the former Minister of Information once said about the national broadcaster:

We want to see a vibrant national public broadcaster that expresses not only our cultural identity and diversity but also expresses our national point of view. And we will ensure that ZBC does this without making any apologies to anyone and without fearing or favouring anyone. ... It's very important and the recent experiences in terms of how our sovereignty, our values, our history have been attacked through the media must be a lesson to all of us (quoted in Ghandi and Jambaya, 2002: 1)

The reference to the ZBC (Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation) can easily be substituted for 'state controlled public media' which are controlled by the ruling party and function as political mouth pieces contrary to the normative roles of public media. The public media are important in (uncritically) mythologizing national heroes, Heroes' Acre as a sacred space and national identity as imagined by ZANU-PF in an attempt to play a role at nation-building. Helen Fulton buttresses this point when she suggests that the media naturalises certain "values, truths and beliefs"- what is called mythologizing (2005, 7). Largely, these truths, beliefs and values are controlled by ZANU-PF in its staging, displaying and narration of power around heroes and the Heroes' Acre (Becker 2011, 527). Below I demonstrate the centrality of the media, especially *The Herald* in relaying messages on and about heroes, Heroes' Acre and national identity as encoded by ZANU-PF through heroes' burials and disputations of hero status.

### **The Heroes' Acre as a 'national' monument**

The Heroes' Acre is not a neutral national space devoid of any political significance. Those considered heroes are buried at this sacred (*The Herald* 01/10/2010) shrine to accrete certain partial meanings to them as signifiers, the Heroes' Acre as a 'sacred' space and certain versions of national identity as imagined by ZANU-PF. The shrine is located on a piece of land measuring 57 hectares on a ridge in Norton a small town located seven kilometres west of Harare. It was designed, financed and built by North Koreans (Becker 2010) and its design takes after and two AK 47 rifles lying back to back with the graves symbolizing the magazine. What makes it unique is its artistic detail, imposing scale and largely "propagandistic rhetoric" (Marschall 2006, 179) whose "many black slabs of memorial granite... concretise[s] a moment in a wider project of national inscription" (Werbner 1998, 82). It acts as a model par excellence

for any commemorative project especially in Africa. Namibia's Heroes' Acre is inspired by the Zimbabwean one for example.

When constructing it, it seems as if Mugabe knew that time moved fast and space was going to be low and there was therefore need to freeze his liberation war patriotic history and nationalist ideologies in space and time. The use of bronze, granite and other weather-enduring material meant to resist the "ravages of time" (Osborne, 1998: 434) speaks to this attempt at freezing those narratives. Instead of being a faithful witness to the past (Dwyer 2004) the national shrine has historically been deceptive as it is a space nationalists have encoded with messages that facilitate selective and politically expedient forms of remembering and forgetting.

In terms of construction, the shrine has "a tall column, crowned by an Eternal Flame, towers above the monument and is intended to symbolise triumphal victory and the desire for freedom" (Marschall 2006, 179, see also Werbner 1998) as central to its architecture and the elite national identity construction project. Central to the shrine is the trademark Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, marked by a colossal statue of three heroic soldiers, two males and one female, carrying a flag, a rocket launcher and an AK 47 assault rifle. The Unknown Soldier is venerated by everyone as "the very lack of an individual identity permits almost everyone to claim the Unknown Soldier as his or her own" (Peihler 1994, 175). It represents those unaccounted for men and women who left their homes to fight in the liberation struggle. This configuration is telling considering the patriarchal and phallic nature of Zimbabwean politics and society encapsulated by Mugabe's *amadoda sibili* (real men) philosophy. Mugabe, in his fight against neo-colonialism, imagined to be sponsored by the West, business, opposition and Brettonwoods institutes has always argued that he needs men with backbone, men who do not waver and cannot be bought, the *amadoda sibili*, to stand up against these bullies whose agenda is regime change.

While the monument exudes pretences of gender inclusivity, it remains exclusive, phallic, masculinised, and militaristic in its treatment of women. Just like the Namibian Heroes' Acre where Becker (2011) observes that there are more images of male soldiers in the panels around than there are females, the Zimbabwean one too 'minimises' the presence and participation of women in the liberation war in similar ways it does to those who never went to exile. Where women appear, they are carrying babies while men are carrying guns and where the women

appear carrying guns; they are muscular, lean, with small breasts (Becker, 2011, 530). The emphasis is on colonial brutalities and gendered features while minimising their feminine attributes. For example, one mural panel illustrates the brutalities of the colonial soldiers where a woman with a baby strapped on her back is brutally beaten by the soldiers while being savagely torn by the police dog. This has formed the core of Mugabe's victimhood and heroic narrative about the colonial era.

Further the monument has characteristics of "socialist realist monument[s]" (Coombes 2011, 206) with two catafalques; one in the front which is used as a ceremonial resting place for a dead hero's casket during the rituals conducted just before official burial while Werbner (1998, 83) suggests that other one, which has never been used, could be reserved for a "Head of State" and there is no guessing that it is meant for Mugabe who is a central figure in the architecture of the Heroes' Acre. Nothing clearly captures this centrality than one of the bronze murals which, in the process of representing a romanticised and masculinised historical narrative of the liberation struggle, shows what is clearly an aesthetically exaggerated Mugabe – head towering others, facial profile clearly defined, looking youthful, innocent, facing ahead in pure leadership style. This imposing portrayal has immortalised Mugabe as an embodiment of the liberation struggle and a grand teller of the national narrative (Mpofu 2014, 2016).

Osborne is of the opinion that such configurations of monuments render these spaces "consensus builders... focal points for identifying with a visual condensation of an imagined national chronicle rendered in heroic symbolism" (2001: 16). Opposition politician Paul Themba Nyathi points out that Mugabe "appears to use the funerals (conducted at the shrine) as a pretext for making major policy statements and to rail against perceived enemies" (2004: 66). This has led to various perceptions that the monument is used for politically expedient rather than nationally inclined purposes.

The Ministry of Information imagines the shrine as a place of pilgrimage for the masses intent on creating their own history, designed to "arouse national consciousness, forge national unity and identity... the pride of the people of Zimbabwe. A symbol of bravery and selflessness of those whose remains are laid to rest there" (Ministry of Information, 1989: 3). On its website, the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority advertises and describes the Heroes' Acre thus:

[the] ...Heroes Acre is a burial ground and national monument ... Its... purpose is to commemorate Patriotic Front guerrillas killed during the Rhodesian Bush War, and contemporary Zimbabweans whose dedication or commitment to their country justify their interment at the shrine.



For Savage (1994, 130) monuments and the commemoration of the war dead anchor and legitimate “the very notion of collective memory” as key to national identity formation and in Zimbabwe this is at the expense of gender, democracy, diversity and inclusivity. Besides the Heroes’ Acre, another important and yet contested aspect related to this is the definition of heroes and conferment of the hero status on the dead. Below I attempt to define national heroes as national identity building blocks.

### **Heroes as national symbols**

Besides symbolising national “state narrative” (Osborne, 2001: 15) and unification, the Heroes’ Acre has been a symbol of ZANU-PF’s tyranny, authoritarianism, control, protocol in national rituals, domination, elitism, top-down decision making and exclusion (Kriger 1995, Mpofo 2014, 2016). It is a discriminating space where some people are deliberately excluded from being buried at the monument on racial, political, sexual orientation or ethnic grounds. Some of this is informed by its structural presence which scholars of commemoration and heritage studies concur is meant to encode selected historical narratives and memories (Becker, 2011; Marschall, 2006; Werbner, 1998) and not only preserve ‘all’ memories from the past (Becker, 2011; Connerton, 1989). This brings to the fore the definition and qualification one has to hold to be a national hero.

Whereas the Heroes’ Acre is probably the most “crucial early part of construction of a national identity in the first decade of (Zimbabwe’s) independence” (Onslow, 2011: 4) theorists of nationalism suggest that heroes are used as spiritual ancestors, definers and unifiers of the imagined national community at every given epoch especially when the national project is under strain (Smith 1999, Hutchins 2011, Anderson 2006). Hutchins (2011, 649) posits that beyond their nationalist leadership roles, national heroes “retain power long past their lifetimes as symbols incarnating national values and character... often ascribed (quasi-) divine roles and devotion in the national consciousness”. However, in the Zimbabwean context, different methods are used to define and determine heroes. A ‘national hero’ is determined by ZANU-PF’s top decision making organ, the politburo or by Mugabe personally. While I am alive to the fact that like all other myths, the “pantheon of heroes and the meanings attributed to them are subject to on-going renegotiation and reinterpretation” (Hutchins, 2011: 650) I argue that in the case of Zimbabwe these renegotiations and reinterpretations are more politically motivated than rational in nature. Thus the conferment of a hero’s status and access to the

shrine at one's death, more than anything, is used by Mugabe to reward or punish his loyalists and enemies respectively, at the expense of fostering national unity. While the heroes and the shrine are potential artefacts for creating national unity and identity, they have been conspicuously contested especially in online and private media within and outside Zimbabwe.

Contestations of the Heroes' Acre are not new in Zimbabwe just like disputes on national identity are common in most nations. There have been concerns on the way the Heroes' Acre has been used by Mugabe especially by opposition parties and within ZANU-PF. The late James Chikerema, Mugabe's uncle who differed with the latter's policies also decried the use of the Heroes' Acre "for political mileage by ZANU-PF" (in Buckle, 2002: 103) while the late University of Zimbabwe academic Masipula Sithole described the process of hero selection and burial as tantamount to "making the Heroes' Acre a ZANU-PF grave yard. It is no longer a Heroes' Acre [for] genuine heroes" (in Buckle, 2002: 103). The marginalising processes of choosing heroes are contested by politicians, academics, the media and ordinary people using online media (Mpofu, 2016 forthcoming). This, however is a separate research altogether as the agenda here is to trace how ZANU-PF has used the dead heroes and the Heroes' Acre to coin narratives meant to sustain its stranglehold on power and political legitimacy.

### **The ZANU-PF script on the Heroes' Acre and heroes**

The Heroes' Acre and the rituals of burial of heroes are intimately linked to the country's liberation, independence and national identity. The Heroes' Acre is an important venue for the latter and Heroes' Day commemorations and both events are usually presided over by President Mugabe – a central insider to the myth of nationhood, patriotism and birth of the nation. Evidence suggests that around two thirds of the heroes buried at the shrine are ZANU-PF and members while many more worthy candidates continue to be ignored based on sexuality, political ideology, race or even ethnicity. This has led to the contestation of the space, definition of a hero and conflicting versions on and of national identity. Some heroes have refused to be buried at the shrine calling it tainted. As of July 2015, Zimbabwe had 122 declared national heroes and heroines 12 of which were not buried at the shrine.

### ***Heroes and nationhood***

Mugabe sees a hero as a "revolutionary who fought oppression... against the resolute will of the unjust and powerful... political and economic calculations... of the oppressor nations of

the West” (*The Herald*, 13/07/2002). In an opinion piece about the late Vice President Joseph Msika, ‘Msika the definition of the hero,’ *The Herald* (09/08/2009) defines a hero as “protector, defender or guardian [and this] is fitting for Cde Msika’s life which was dedicated to protecting, defending and guarding the interests of Zimbabwe and its people”. This summarised the narrow understanding of the hero by the public media and ZANU-PF. One conspicuous addition to this definition is unquestioning loyalty to ZANU-PF regardless of the party’s mutations into an increasingly intolerant movement that ruthlessly deals with opponents. In one feature article *The Herald* argues that:

Coincidentally... all true heroes belong to one party, ZANU-PF... This party with its purported sins organised, fought and liberated this country. So in terms of patriotism ZANU-PF and its cadres demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that they are patriotic. However, when ZANU-PF or its cadres celebrate this unquestionably proud legacy they are accused of personalising the struggle or restricting patriotism to a political party. (29/08/2011).

True Zimbabweans are therefore expected to see heroes as role models, follow in their footsteps and be loyal to ZANU-PF.

In a speech on the burial of Bernard Chidzero, a former ZANU-PF Member of Parliament and Minister of Finance in Mugabe’s cabinet, at the Heroes’ Acre, Mugabe told Zimbabweans to “examine themselves to see if they are defending the sovereignty and independence of the country, which the heroes died fighting for or toiled to uphold after independence” (*The Herald*, 13/08/2002). Thus heroes are those that fought for the country and later served the party and country after independence. The dead heroes are venerated and Zimbabweans are implored to gain inspiration from the knowledge that they sacrificed their lives for the birth of the mythic ‘Zimbabwean’ nation. The suggestion in such narratives is that most ZANU-PF members who fought in the liberation war later ‘selflessly’ served Zimbabwe after independence. This is far from the truth as the postcolonial state has been treated – vulture style – as a site for ‘eating’, that is, self-aggrandizement by those in and connected to the leadership structures of ZANU-PF.

The prevalent representations and memorialisations of heroes in a narrow sense imagined by Mugabe strips some of the heroes off of their heroism. For instance Mugabe says of ‘Father Zimbabwe’, Joshua Nkomo: “[I]f Joshua Nkomo were to rise this hour, would you be fit to hold his hand and walk in step with him down the path that emanates from the very sacred shrine and ends in the great future for our country?” (*The Herald*, 13.08.02). Nkomo, the

mythic founder of the struggle and ancestor of the nation did not stand for what Mugabe stands for especially in the post 2000 Zimbabwe. The current Mugabe regime is characterised by corruption, intolerance and willingness to use violence to solve political differences something Nkomo was against. The assumption in the quote above is that Mugabe and his loyalists would get approval from Nkomo to do as they will but it's on record that Nkomo not only fought against colonialism but was also against black leaders, his "former colleagues in the liberation struggle," (1984, xiii) oppressing the majority as expressed in his biography *The story of my life*. In April 1986 at the burial of Lookout Masuku, the ZIPRA ex-commander, Nkomo further demonstrated where he stood in terms of postcolonial politics in relation to human rights and good governance; characteristics not synonymous with ZANU-PF's style of governance. He attacked postcolonial leaders for corruption and authoritarianism. Kriger quotes Nkomo as saying "We accused and condemned the White minority... for creating a police state and yet we exceed them when we create a military state. We accused the former colonisers who used detention without trial as well as torture and yet we do exactly... if not worse" (1995, 152).

Mugabe's appropriation of Nkomo's memory is illustrative of inconsistencies of ZANU-PF's nationalist project predicated on using national heroes and the Heroes' Acre monument to gain political legitimacy and maintain its hegemony. Nkomo was Mugabe's 'former' sworn enemy and has been used by ZANU-PF after death, amidst popular disenchantment among Zimbabweans with the status quo, to unify the nation – something politically expedient only to Mugabe and ZANU-PF. In most nationalist narratives, especially those soon after independence, Nkomo's Zimbabwe African People's Union (PF-ZAPU) and its military wing the Zimbabwe People's Revolution Army (ZIPRA) were relegated and edited out of the country's liberation narrative (Martin and Johnson 1981) only to be reinserted when it suits Mugabe.

A critical analysis of the above speaks to tensions in Zimbabwean politics during the liberation struggle and this makes one understand continued crises of Zimbabwean national identity project. The reinsertion of Nkomo, PF-ZAPU and ZIPRA into the narrative saw Nkomo being elevated to sainthood and celebrated as 'Father Zimbabwe' by Mugabe and ZANU-PF when in the early 1980s he was denigrated as 'father of dissidents,' 'big-bellied Ndebele King' and a 'cobra whose head was supposed to be crushed' by Mugabe and his supporters. Further, Mugabe adds that anyone who does anything contrary to what the heroes (and by extension ZANU-PF) 'stand' for or opposes its hegemony is "a willing traitor and second executioner of

these heroes, a willing posthumous betrayer of their cause, indeed the eager butcher of the revolution, our heritage and of the future of our children” (*The Herald*, 13.08.02).

Further, heroes are mythologised as forming the pith of the nation. An example of this is Mugabe’s statement at the burial of Vice President Simon Muzenda who was seen as “an emancipator of the people... maker of the nation, it’s very throbbing soul ... its guardian, its revolutionary spirit which cruel fate sought to destroy that dark afternoon of September 20, 2003” (*The Herald*, 25.11.2003). Mugabe speaks in the backdrop of a massive challenge to ZANU-PF’s hegemony by the opposition MDC and his sentiments have to be intertextually read with the post 2000 political economy of decline. Deaths of heroes therefore are not the end but a continuation of the construction of the nation from another ‘world’. Heroes “function as moral beacons, behavioural models and representations of [the nation’s] beliefs and self-conception” (Hutchins, 2011: 650). Even after death, heroes are spoken to and hear ‘us’ since they are immortal. For instance, Mugabe addressed Chenjerai Hunzvi while he lay in the casket thus “[T]o you Hunzvi I say: you have done your part, you have fought your struggle... gallantly, staunchly defending your birth right and your revolutionary heritage. You indeed deserve the halo of a national hero” (*The Herald*, 19.06.2001). The subtext is that the listeners must follow in the heroes’ footsteps and defend the nation from possible colonisation by the British through the opposition parties.

Hunzvi who allegedly did not participate in the liberation war, gained notoriety as the leader of the war veterans and the trail of destruction he left to the Zimbabwean socio-political and economic landscape which outweighs any reasons one may give for his hero status. He was declared a hero therefore for assisting ZANU-PF maintain political power through coordinating and participating in the party’s violent electoral campaigns and violent land reform. He is also known for looting the war victims’ compensation fund together with some well-connected ZANU-PF officials including their relatives. Hunzvi is part of what Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems (2009, 958) call the ‘new’ heroes; those who did not participate in the liberation war. They however participated in what later became known as the *Third Chimurenga* – war for land – waged against commercial farmers leading to the violent seizures of white owned land. This chaotic land repossession process had three main achievements. First was the partial provision of land and fulfilment of the aspirations of those who fought in the liberation war; and that is land ownership. Second, land was used as an identity marker and political tool by ZANU-PF. Third, some of those who were active during this *Third Chimurenga* became the

‘new’ heroes – rewards from Mugabe for helping him stay in power. The myth of heroism of those declared national heroes seems to be determined by what good they do for ZANU-PF and not for Zimbabweans as a whole hence, to a certain extent, the true measure of heroism is unquestioning loyalty to party principles.

A hero, according is “part of the national symbolism” (*The Herald* 08/08/2002), one who went to prison, experienced the wrath of the colonialists and was consistent in supporting the party until death. In a story ‘Chinamano laid to rest,’ *The Herald* quotes the acting President Joseph Msika who presided over the burial describing the late heroine Ruth Chinanamano thus:

as a fearless and dedicated freedom fighter whose spirit and determination the Rhodesians failed to break. In the streets where we demonstrated and fought pitched battles with the Rhodesians... Ruth was there in the thick of things... She knew the inside of Gonakudzingwa, that notorious detention centre which broke the mettle of many nationalists, including male ones who fell by the wayside, but left her unbowed. (*The Herald* 07/01/2005).

Some salient aspects could be observed here. By fighting and enduring the harsh detention conditions, Chinamano encroaches into the male domain and the mere fact that resilience is imagined as a male characteristic speaks to the ‘patriachalisation’ of the liberation war alluded to earlier. In addition, a hero, as already alluded to before, must have fought in the liberation war and endured prison time. One of the most repeated attributes of being a hero is what ZANU-PF calls being “committed to the principles and values of the party” both before and after independence (*The Herald* 07/01/2005). The conflation of the state and party has been resourceful to ZANU-PF especially in the post 2000s when its hegemony has been under scrutiny and has been challenged by opposition parties and ordinary citizens. This was also tested during the Government of National Unity (GNU) between ZANU-PF and two MDC opposition parties. The MDC contested the selection of the heroes and usages of the Heroes’ Acre as a ZANU-PF shrine. In a story ‘House debates heroism status’ *The Herald* reports:

There was heated debate in the House of Assembly yesterday over conferment of national hero status. MDC members alleged lack of consistency in the manner heroes are declared while their Zanu-PF counterparts said those who deserved to be declared national heroes had been duly accorded the status... Luveve representative Mr Reggie Moyo... argued that people from Matabeleland were being sidelined when it came to conferment of national hero status. (*The Herald* 14/06/2011)

Besides advancing the common tales of heroism, ZANU-PF also takes available opportunities to point out the moral degeneracy of those considered villains starting from the colonialists who are described as “oppressor nations of the west” (*The Herald* 13/08/2002), “the white

settlers” (*The Herald* 07/01/2005), “colonial oppressors,” looters and “plunderers” (*The Herald* 08/08/2009) or “foreigners” (*The Herald* 14/04/2011). This creation of a common enemy is meant to create unity among Zimbabweans.

These representations and narratives on heroes partly inform the post 2000 ‘war’ between Mugabe and the West. Most narratives in the public media, just like Mugabe’s speeches at various fora like addresses at the Heroes’ Acre during the burials spoke to this tension. For example, *The Herald* (15/08/2011) believes that “the West has been at war with the people of Zimbabwe, as with the rest of the African continent, because the British wanted to negate the Truth of the people’s ownership of their God-given resources”. In a story ‘Mugabe humbles Blair’ *The Herald* celebrates Mugabe’s speech at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 where Mugabe told the former British Prime Minister to stop meddling in Zimbabwe’s internal affairs. The report went thus:

This was probably his finest moment in history as he hogged international limelight on all major television networks, newspapers, radio talk shows and news agency reports. In just 10 minutes he had devastated the entire Western coalition against Zimbabwe and given the Third World a new voice to speak with boldness against neo-colonialism being brought in the name of globalisation and democracy... This has exposed the British machinations against Zimbabwe and its hate sanctions campaign based on blatant lies... What the speech has achieved more than anything else is the message that firstly, Zimbabwe is a truly free country and will die protecting its sovereignty. Secondly, the land reform programme is here to stay. (*The Herald* 04/09/2002)

Mugabe’s speeches have consistently alluded to the fact that “We are not for sale, Zimbabwe is not for sale... not for the highest bidder and let Mr Blair hear... we are not for the British bidder” and this has been complimented by some of the banners (obviously printed by ZANU-PF) which castigate the so-called illegal sanctions while mourning the dead heroes. Messages such as “Sanctions, Public Enemy Number One”, “You served your country well” and “Zorora Murugare Mwana Wevhu” (chiShona for rest in peace son of the soil), “Zimbabwe is a sovereign state we will defend it with our blood” (14 April 2011) are used to engender feelings of patriotism and amplify government redistributive policies. “Uniting against sanctions”, “Pamberi nekudzikisa mutengo” (chiShona for Forward with reducing retail prices), “Economic saboteurs do not have a place in Zimbabwe”, “Africa's cause is our cause” and “Zimbabwe will never be a colony again” (*The Herald* 14/07/2007) are illustrative. According to the United States, it imposed economic sanctions on some individuals serving in Mugabe’s regime “in 2003 as a result of the actions and policies of certain members of the Government of Zimbabwe and other persons undermining democratic institutions and processes in

Zimbabwe” (US Embassy Harare, online). However, the implementation and effects of these sanctions on the Zimbabwean economy and society at large is debatable (Mpofu 2014).

### ***The Heroes’ Acre and nationhood***

The Heroes’ Acre is meant to embody the ethos of liberation war in an enduring form. Its construction out of resistant materials like granite gives the liberation memory longevity. Moreover, as Young (1999, 6) suggests, the state’s memory locus is naturalised and “its ideals and founding myths are cast as naturally true as the landscape in which they stand” as possible. Moreover, the most reiterated theme in memory studies runs almost in agreement to Appelfeld’s claim that “[M]emory is elusive and selective: it holds onto what it chooses to hold on to... Very like a dream, memory takes specific details out of the viscous flow of events...” (2004: v). This memory is open to manipulation as ZANU-PF has done in an attempt to survive the hostile domestic political climate where its legitimacy is questioned. Zelinsky (in Osborne, 2001: 7) believes modern nations like Zimbabwe “could neither exist nor operate effectively without an adequate body of symbol and myth” (1989: 13) partly because the postcolonial nation-as-a-people does not exist.

In a recent article in *The Herald*, the heroes acre:

...carries the richness of a people struggle against the brutal oppressive regime. There lies the leadership of a people’s revolution, those who sacrificed their life to bring change in Zimbabwe politics thereby shaping not only the country’s developmental pattern but also the region... [It is also a space where] we cherish our history as learning from it can help foster national unity which is one of the aims of the National Heroes Acre. This monument serves as an education centre for students, ordinary Zimbabweans and tourists from abroad about a major part of this nation’s history. (*The Herald* 15/07/2015)

At the beginning of what is currently known as the Zimbabwe ‘crisis’ Mugabe said the Heroes’ Acre was a “sacred shrine that was home to the country’s fine citizens endowed with selfless qualities of humanity”. Mugabe’s spokesman Charles Charamba, writing under the pseudonym Nathaniel Manheru clarified what these fine citizens were when he described the National Heroes’ Acre as:

... not a facility for bleaching darkened political souls. It is a site and recognition of honour: honour irrevocably achieved and thus honour which cannot be reversed or undone through subsequent transgressions. ZANU-PF, the sole creator of that Acre ... sole author of rules of entry to that shrine, relies on death for this irrevocability. (*The Herald* 28.08.2010)

Thus a ‘darkened soul’ seems to be the one that does not belong to ZANU-PF. Regardless of that darkened soul’s contribution to the fight against colonialism or tyranny in postcolonial Zimbabwe, it cannot gain entry into the Heroes’ Acre, a space ZANU-PF appropriates as its



own. The darkened soul is also referred to as a stooge or sell-out as reported by *The Herald* which cites Mugabe as saying that the Heroes' Acre is "not for sellouts, but patriotic Zimbabweans who sacrificed their lives to liberate the country from the colonial white regime" (21/02/2013). The emphasis seems to be on that the Heroes' Acre is meant for those who fought against the colonial regime.

The imaginations of the Heroes' Acre as integral to the founding of the nation and important for national unity has been a major theme since the beginning of the 2000s. The following extract from a report 'Leave us alone — President tells West' in *The Herald* (14/04/2011) illustrates this:

President Mugabe yesterday slammed Europeans for their continued meddling in the country's internal affairs saying Zimbabwe is a sovereign State with the right to determine its own destiny. The President, who was speaking at the burial of Cde Menard Livingstone Muzariri at the National Heroes Acre, challenged Zimbabweans to be vigilant in the face of continued aggression by Western powers.

This period has seen Mugabe constantly fighting the West, MDC and other imagined enemies while calling on Zimbabweans to be patriotic and defend the country as did the heroes buried at the national Heroes' Acre. The following quotation from Mugabe demonstrates this argument: "We must be ready to defend our country, sacrifice our lives as many who fought the struggle did" (*The Herald*, 14/04/2011). In addition, since 2000 the Heroes' Acre has been used as a forum to advance certain narratives on indigenisation and the land. Notice how Mugabe 'celebrates' and encourages the indigenisation process that followed the land reform at a burial of ZANU-PF's Ephraim Masawi at the Heroes' Acre:

We are an independent country now. Our resources are ours. They belong to Zimbabweans... the sons and daughters of Zimbabwe and those who want to share the resources must get our permission to do so. We must agree that they come as partners and come as partners in a manner we define and not in a manner they define. The manner we defined is quite straightforward — Zimbabweans should have major shareholding in whatever enterprises... Some of our trained young people have been conditioned to worshipping the white men working as CEOs in white men's enterprises whether its Anglo-American or Rio Tinto, this is now old fashioned. You were born again in 1980. You are now the masters and those who made you CEOs should now be your CEOs (*The Herald*, 01/10/2010)

In 2011 Mugabe further clarified ZANU-PF's transition from the land reform to economic indigenisation. At the burial of Menard Livingstone Muzariri at the Heroes' Acre he reiterated that the control of Zimbabwe's resources was important in maintaining the country's sovereignty.

If our economy is controlled by outsiders, our politics will similarly be controlled by outsiders . . . That is why we want our people to have economic power so that the political power we have secured through the barrel of the gun is economic based. If there is no economic base then that independence is weak,

that is why we have the indigenisation policy so that our resources are controlled and owned by us so that they benefit the majority of our people (*The Herald*, 14/04/2011)

The Heroes' Acre also "embodies prescriptions for future behaviour," (Fisher, 2010: 88) when, as Mugabe's pronouncements from there urge people to uphold the values of the nation as did such heroes as "Leopold Takawira, Chairman Herbert Chitepo, General Josiah Magama Tongogara, Jason Moyo, Nikita Mangena... The Old Man, Tangwena" (*The Herald*, 08/08/2009). These heroes and those members dedicated to ZANU-PF are portrayed as paragons of nationalist decorum to be emulated by ordinary citizens. During these rituals of national identity formation, ZANU-PF speaks and demands respect for the heroes 'in the interest of the nation,' calling people to be patriotic and dedicated cadres prepared to defend the nation "against the resolute will of the unjust and powerful, against the political and economic calculations and dictates of oppressor nations of the West, now the European Union and America" (*The Herald*, 08/08/2009).

This is further substantiated by Gillis (1994: 3) who states that the state's presentation of "bureaucracy of memory" gives a "sense of sameness over time and space" by perpetrating what Osborne (2001: 9) calls "systems of remembering and forgetting that ... favour elite memory over popular memory". As such, the national shrine and burial of heroes form an important site and rituals respectively for ZANU-PF to advance certain notions of nationhood, search for political legitimacy and defend itself from perceived enemies. The outcome of ZANU-PF's narrative on heroes and the Heroes' Acre is the consistency in pointing out enemies and friends of the nation, the role of the liberation history and memory in the construction of the nation and expected behaviours from citizens.

The commemorations and burial of the heroes are underlined by Mugabe's speeches where the themes of victimhood and heroism are used to locate ZANU-PF at the core of liberation history and postcolonial nation-making and its survival (Mpofo 2016). The themes of oppression and victimhood that Mugabe usually refers to when speaking about colonialism and Zimbabwe's sovereignty are embedded in the iconic graphical illustrations on some panels at the Heroes' Acre which show white Rhodesian forces attacking helpless blacks, especially women. Similar attacks are extended to the nation by the West through what ZANU-PF has generally referred to as evil economic sanctions. This helps divert people's attention from the real issues affecting Zimbabwe of which ZANU-PF is largely responsible.

At the core of Zimbabwe's problems though is a complex interplay of issues and not just a "simplified picture of a monolithic neo-patrimonial power structure" (Zamponi, 2005: 31). The formation of the MDC in 1999 presented a challenge to ZANU-PF's hegemony and the latter plunged the country into a crisis as it used redistributive measures and violence to maintain its stranglehold on power, in turn affecting the identity terrain in Zimbabwe – creating the mythic insiders and outsiders to the nation characterised by patriotic and unpatriotic tendencies respectively. Eliminating from national belonging those who disagree seems to have been ZANU-PF's preferred strategy. For Chikuhwa (2004: 57) Zimbabwe has become a military and police dictatorship "where court orders are ignored and defied by those sworn to defend and uphold the laws of the country [and this] opens the judicial system to ridicule and contempt."

### **Concluding remarks**

That the national hero status and the Heroes' Acre are symbols and spaces associated with power, prestige and legitimacy is beyond debate. From the foregoing it is clear that the post 2000 Zimbabwean political events have made it almost impossible for ZANU-PF to maintain certain narratives in search of its legitimacy without using the Heroes' Acre and national heroes as central symbols. Despite almost losing its appeal especially to the young generations whose definitions of heroes most likely conflict with those of ZANU-PF, the ruling party has managed to keep the issue of the country's liberation, current status under attack by the West and its successes regarding the land reform and economic emancipation relevant to Zimbabweanness. What is clear from the narratives is that the heroes have demonstrated what it means to be patriotic and set for those remaining examples to follow. As one of the few remaining liberation war 'heroes' and iconic founder of the nation Mugabe has become the living national ancestor who militarily personifies and tells the grand narratives, relates the myths and brings to life memories of liberation war and nation-making. By occupying the centre stage during funerals, Mugabe becomes an authority on issues of national construction. He is connected, intimately, both to the living and the dead. In the process, he uses the funerals of heroes and their burial at the shrine to advance narrow and sectarian political views leading to an advancement and appeal for adoption of a limiting and exclusivist brand of national identity. National identities are fluid and change from time to time depending on the socio-political and economic environment and attempts by ZANU-PF to impose an elite defined brand of national identity is problematic. This article has also demonstrated some problems and internal inconsistencies

with ZANU-PF's nation-making project. For instance, it is not a far-fetched conclusion that ZANU-PF has deferred people's dreams born at independence. Despite some positive contributions, ZANU-PF's legacy to Zimbabwe is overshadowed by corruption, xenophobia, tribalism, racism, violence, human rights violations and suppression of dissent. Most of these have been advanced through the use of the narratives surrounding the liberation war memory as linked to national heroes and the Heroes' Acre to seek legitimacy, justify ZANU-PF's actions and maintain its hegemony.

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