

## **Report on Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) seminar 'Towards Cultural Constructions of Zimbabwe', Oxford, 27 June 2008**

Workshop organised by 'The Cultural Images in and of Africa' research programme at the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden, in collaboration with the Britain Zimbabwe Society.

### **Introduction by Mai Palmberg**

The Oxford workshop followed a seminar workshop organised in Harare in November 2007, which was entitled 'The Cultural Construction of Zimbabwe'. The reason for beginning with a seminar in Harare was the need to keep the research discussion on Zimbabwe within Zimbabwe, and therefore more available to local academics. It was a deliberate choice that academic debates on Zimbabwe should not be conducted only in 'the North'. The organisers hoped that the Harare workshop would contribute to a broader dialogue. The title of the Oxford seminar differed slightly from the title of the Harare seminar in one important respect. Rather than focusing on the process of nation building, which is a singular project aimed at constructing *a* cultural national identity, the Oxford seminar focused on multiple constructions of the Zimbabwean nation. In choosing plurality as a point of departure for the seminar, it was the hope of the organisers that the Oxford forum would contribute to a greater understanding of cultural processes that are at play in Zimbabwe at present.

### **Opening address**

Professor Terence Ranger's opening address widened the scope of the workshop by drawing up the contrasts between the election process in Zimbabwe and the aftermath of the recent Kenyan election. The paper particularly focused on the uses being made of history in both situations. Asking 'why Zimbabwe is what it is, which is very different from Kenya', the contrast between the two situations was shown to be illuminating, especially when examining the ways the press writes about history, heritage and heroism, and how these themes have been drawn upon in the two different situations. In Zimbabwe, this election continued the trend from previous elections, where history has been an overriding theme in election campaigning. On election day in the March elections, *The Herald* carried three articles about history, citing the importance of preserving Zimbabwe's history and heritage. In Kenya, on the other hand, it appeared as if the dominant discourse was the opposite: 'history is tearing Kenya apart'. Ranger argued that the main difference between the two situations then is that in Zimbabwe the 'idea of the nation' is captured by the state, whereas Kenyan national identity comprises multiple constructions. Ranger pointed out that in Kenya, there has been a great deal of attention for the historical ethnic divisions between different groups, whereas in Zimbabwe the discourse is all about the nation as a whole.

Ranger's paper also highlighted the differences in how Zimbabwe and Kenya administer the maintenance of national history and heritage. In Zimbabwe, the status of a national hero is centrally defined by the Politburo, whereas in Kenya heroes are nominated by the regions. In Zimbabwe, the national revolution is 'owned by Mugabe',

and accordingly Zimbabwe's history 'must be guarded' from those who challenge Mugabe's authority. Therefore, in his challenge to Mugabe, Morgan Tsvangirai had by definition 'betrayed the Zimbabwean history'.

The difficulty which intellectuals have had in constructing an alternative history to that of ZANU-PF, Ranger argued, could be helped by looking at what has happened in Kenya. The question must be, 'how do you go about constructing a nation?'. In Kenya, a group of intellectuals started posing the difficult question of how to re-imagine the nation, as an intellectual entity and as a constitutional entity. For them the challenge was to construct a Kenyan identity that would go beyond the identity of different ethnicities and past the 'accidental identity' which the Kenyan nation has become associated with. Such an intellectual project sees no parallels in Zimbabwe at present. 'The dream of Zimbabwe' has turned into a nightmare. There is a dream of a certain Zimbabwe, but it is not a project. The intellectual project these days is to deconstruct rather than to construct or reconstruct the nation.

Traditionalist ideas of going back into history to find prophetic projections of the present have also been prominent tropes in both Kenya and Zimbabwe. In Kenya, people claiming to be the bearer of messages from the forefathers, or being reincarnations of these forefathers appeared after the election, and different text messages were being sent around Kenya by different groups claiming authority for their causes. In Zimbabwe, it is the state that is appealing to spiritual powers, by claiming the authority of the spirit Nehanda particularly, thus making this venue unavailable to the opposition. ZANU-PF was therefore very disappointed when Nehanda's home district was won by the opposition. *The Herald* carried an opinion piece where Nehanda was said to be 'spinning in her grave', and in the rerun there have been constant appeals to Nehanda.

Both in Kenya and Zimbabwe, the memory of past oppressions carries great weight. But unlike Kenya, where violence has occurred along ethnic lines, there is still a semblance of a national state in Zimbabwe despite the history of genocide in Matabeleland. For example, the Mthwakazi Action Group on Genocide in Matabeleland and Midlands (MAGGEM) argues that the present violence in ZANU-PF strongholds can be likened to that of the Gukurahundi but should be seen as a result of authoritarianism rather than being ethnically motivated. What is happening in Mashonaland and Manicaland now resembles what happened in the 1980s and people in these provinces are now discovering what happened in Matabeleland before. New national heroes are emerging out of this violent oppression. For example, in this new wave of violence, the MDC has created its own national heroes during burials of MDC activists such as Tonderai Ndira. ZANU-PF has reacted very strongly against this rhetoric, claiming that the MDC is not entitled to determine who qualifies as a national hero. The ruling party has argued that this is a set standard which does not apply to 'common thugs'. Nevertheless, as Ranger outlined in his paper, a new national history may emerge out of the current struggle.

## **Session 1: 'Establishing'**

In continuation of Professor Ranger's opening address, the first session dealt with the ways in which different cultural spheres have been part of the cultural nation building project in Zimbabwe. Both as officially recognised and sponsored 'pet project', which

came out in Claire Jones' paper on the use of the Zimbabwean marimba, and as an embattled cultural space which was reflected in Sara Rich Dorman's paper on Zimbabwean religious movements.

**Sara Rich-Dorman** discussed how religion and politics in Zimbabwe has often been drawn into party politics, but more importantly how this has opened moral and theological questions and debates for pastors from different denominations of Zimbabwean churches. In her paper, she posed the following question: how do theology and nation building in Zimbabwe sit together? She argued that during the liberation struggle, the churches were to a certain extent on the side of the nationalists, while in the post-independence period, the churches tried to convince the government that they were 'on their side'. In the 2000s, churches tried to construct themselves as mediators between the government and the opposition. However, recent experiences, and Operation Murambatsvina in particular, have forced many pastors to take a stance against the government. Rich-Dorman pointed out that, on the one hand, there is a process of theological renewal where pastors are trying to articulate a religious response to the current crisis. This was for instance the reasoning behind the 'The Zimbabwe We Want' manifesto in which a number of church leaders tried to articulate a positive vision of the nation and to construct a 'New Zimbabwe'. On the other hand, there is a battle of church elites, where difficult questions of what bishops should do and say are posed, and where there is a struggle over how bishops should position themselves, some as supporters and some as opponents of the government.

At the same time, there is a movement within the traditional churches, a shift from contextual theology to pastoral training, which entails moving away from theology and trying to meet the needs of people on the ground. Younger pastors experience a need to find ways to talk about the violence and social evils which they experience in their daily work when people turn to them for leadership. Among these young pastors, there is a sense that one cannot distinguish the pastor's religious role from the social role. Everyday issues, religious issues and political issues are sitting uneasily together, but are all pressing and important to the parishioners. Rich-Dorman quoted a young pastor as saying: 'as a pastor you are not meant to take sides [...] but how can you say something which is evil that it is not so?'. So, while these young pastors felt helpless, they were positioning themselves by actively helping people who were on the run, or by taking a stance against the destruction of people's livelihoods. For these pastors, this was not a question of abstract theologies but of providing 'down to earth' practical solutions to people's problems. Pastors also pointed out that the depoliticised position of the churches was reminiscent of the missionary churches and that this position should be abandoned in a post-colonial context. Rich-Dorman argued that these young pastors were trying to articulate a faith which 'takes you away from fear'. Ultimately, this constituted a more radical position which attempts to bridge the gap between what is said in the bible and what they see in reality. By doing so, they call for a Zimbabwean response to the social crisis and contribute to a re-imagining of the nation.

**Claire Jones** contributed with a historical discussion of the construction of the Zimbabwean marimba as an indigenous Zimbabwean instrument, and its role in the post-independence nation building project. Jones argued that although the modern Zimbabwean marimbas were already introduced by white musicians during the Rhodesian period, the marimba was made into a nationalist symbol and has been used to

relate a whole generation to images of the nation. Because musical instruments are 'social things', there can be changes in how these objects are used, how they are seen and even how they look. As such, the Zimbabwean marimba was built from instruments from other places on the continent, with a hybrid design. Because it was not played by any major ethnic groups and it was considered a distinctly African instrument, the marimba was chosen to epitomise an idea of 'racial partnership' in music and seen as useful in the development of a 'national' type of music. The instrument was used in teachers colleges, where future teachers were encouraged to teach it in schools. From the teachers colleges, popular groups spread marimba music through radio which fuelled the instrument's growing popularity. A culture of youth centre marimba groups emerged, partly because it could be a prosperous career path if the groups were successful in being employed at tourist [sightsites](#).

At independence, the state took on the marimba as an 'official indigenous instrument' at 'airport rituals', galas and independence celebrations, where traditional dance groups were engaged to entertain with 'traditional instruments'. At this point, teaching in 'traditional culture' at schools often solely constituted of marimba teaching. In the early 1990s, the national dance company of Zimbabwe - like other folkloric dance groups in the same period - included marimba music in its repertoire, even though the marimba was not 'traditionally' seen as a dance instrument. The 1990s also saw the marimba being included in bands which combined African and Western instruments in their productions. Jones concluded by arguing that, while the marimba was at independence portrayed as an indigenous instrument and used in various imaginaries of the nation, it has today to a large extent been replaced by the mbira which has now taken over as the 'truly national' instrument. The Zimbabwean marimba, however, still has multiple imaginings and is from time to time being portrayed as a pre-colonial instrument with a proud past which can be revived.

## **Session 2: 'Representing'**

The second session discussed the way in which televised music galas came to epitomise and celebrate ZANU-PF's 'party-nation'; how blood and bones constitute a central place in official versions of national identity; the place of postcolonial violence in Zimbabwean literature and the construction of Zimbabwean womanhood through the archetypes of 'respectable women' and 'small houses'.

**Sabelo Ndlovu** and **Wendy Willems** discussed the rise of cultural nationalism in Zimbabwe, expressed through the range of official music galas and bashes which emerged in the early 2000s and were broadcasted on television. They argued that the 'Third Chimurenga' was not only constituted by the controversial fast-track land reform programme and militarisation of the state but also by an intensified cultural celebration of a fetishised nation. Ndlovu and Willems spelled out the historical circumstances in which cultural nationalism was brought into the centre of national politics by ZANU-PF. While culture and music played an important role during the nationalist struggle in the 1960s and 1970s, it was revived in the 2000s when the ZANU-PF regime was faced with a crisis of legitimacy after the failure of developmental nationalism. A range of music galas and bashes sought to mediate and forge a national consciousness that was based on ZANU-PF's version of national identity. The celebrations effectively silenced the

contribution of other liberation movements such as ZAPU towards Zimbabwe's independence and conferred legitimacy on ZANU-PF's continued rule of Zimbabwe. Ndlovu and Willems highlighted how concepts such as 'independence', 'unity' and 'heroes' were given renewed relevance in the specific context of the 2000s in which ZANU-PF's rule was increasingly challenged by the increasing competition from the opposition MDC.

**Kizito Muchemwa** discussed how the symbols of national identity and national sovereignty have continually been reinvented and recreated into symbols of the Zimbabwean state and ZANU-PF. Muchemwa argued that the symbols of bones and blood are among the most potent symbols of ZANU-PF in its claim to state power. He noted that the narrative of bones is not only a ZANU-PF creation but writers such as Solomon Mutshaiwo and Yvonne Vera have also shared this common set of cultural symbols. However, a particular version of national identity has been constructed by the ZANU-PF state through national commemoration days, military parades and Heroes Day. Referring to Achille Mbembe's term 'the economy of signs', Muchemwa noted that the Zimbabwean construction of national identity draws from 'a drama of magnificence'. But unlike the cases which are the basis of Mbembe's theory, there is little room for the oppressed to come to the fore in Zimbabwe. Examples of the Zimbabwean state's use of the 'drama of magnificence' are the funerals of national heroes which are used as occasions for the state, the president and ZANU-PF to display their own power and magnificence rather than to speak of the dead and their achievements. The funerals and galas were meant to commemorate the heroes of the nation but rather than being personally honoured for their contribution to the liberation of the nation, the heroes have become canonised symbols of national identity. Muchemwa argued that there is a connection between the glorification of 'bones and bloodshed' during the liberation struggle and contemporary violence. In order to become a hero, one has to participate in the historical narrative of violence. It is only in violence that one can acquire heroism and as such, Zimbabwean history and nationalism are closely related to bloodshed. Accordingly, President Mugabe makes no apology for the shedding of blood as within ZANU-PF's discourse killing is made legitimate and even a symbol of national pride. This creates problems for the kind of nationalism which can be created in the future because national identity and history seem to be 'haunted by ghosts'.

**Ashleigh Harris** discussed the way in which Zimbabwean literature has engaged with the issue of postcolonial violence. In her presentation, she analysed two novels. First of all, Ian Holding's novel *Unfeeling* which tells the story of Davey Baker, a 16-year old Zimbabwean whose parents were killed in an attack during the land occupations part of the government's fast track land reform programme. After the attack, Davey escapes school, returns to the farm and kills the new farm owner. However, the novel ultimately removes the guilt from Davey when it appears that the farm owner had already been killed by farm workers before she was shot by Davey. Harris argues that *Unfeeling* on the one hand portrays Davey as bearing witness to the land occupation campaign but on the other hand, he has a strong imperative to do something about the violence and to take revenge.

The second novel is Valerie Tagwira's *The Uncertainty of Hope* which narrates the lives of a market woman, Onai Moyo, and her best friend, Katy Nguni, a vendor and black-market dealer. Tagwira's novel is set against the background of Operation

Murambatsvina, a 'clean-up' exercise introduced by government in mid-2005 which resulted in the destruction of numerous backyard shacks and informal markets. Similar to *Unfeeling*, Onai and Katy also bear witness to the violence and horrors caused by OM. However, as Harris argues, the novel does not move away from the moralism prevalent in the government's narrative on OM. The novel represents Onai and Katy as faithful women and contrasts these with two ex-prostitutes who have broken sexual mores and norms. Both ex-prostitutes contract HIV/AIDS and the novel considers this as a form of moral retribution against people who behave badly. *The Uncertainty of Hope* also positively values the clean-up of Mbare Market and describes street children in negative terms. In this regard, the novel could be seen to some extent as being complicit with state discourses.

**Lene Bull Christiansen** discussed how the 'women, gender and AIDS circuit' in Zimbabwe responds to questions of prostitution and infidelity in a time of AIDS. According to Christiansen, this circuit consists of a group of professional women who work or have worked in the NGO sector in the field of gender and/or HIV/AIDS. They operate in the difficult space between having to maintain a middle class position under competition for international donor funding while at the same time maintaining recognition from the state. Christiansen argued that this has resulted into a difficult and oftentimes contested positioning between different actors with different views on society. It has meant having to operate in the schism between on the one hand international donor discourses on sexuality and AIDS which emphasise women's status in society, and on the other hand, these women have had to maintain a 'neutral and respected' position vis-à-vis the patriarchal power matrix of the Zimbabwean state.

Christiansen noted that while the international human rights discourses of gender, women and HIV/AIDS prevention have a strong emphasis on condom use as a key factor. During interviews she conducted with women from the 'women, gender and HIV/AIDS circuit', Christiansen noted a moral outrage over the fact that married women are at great risk of HIV/AIDS infection. That is, the fact that 'respectable women' who did 'everything right' still fell through in the end. In this context, the problem of 'small houses' was often referred to as one of the key issues in relation to women's vulnerability to HIV infection. The popular slang term 'small house' has connotations with polygamy and second and third wives. It encompasses women who engage in a whole spectrum of activities, i.e. semi-prostitutes, women whose flat is paid for by men and women who depend on married boyfriends as part of their upkeep. A common reasoning was that 'respectable married women' were being put in danger by the actions of 'small houses'.

Through an analysis of three sets of texts - the novels *Whose Daughter, My Child* by Grace Mutandwa, *The Uncertainty of Hope* by Valerie Tagwira and the column *Let's talk about AIDS* by Beatrice Tonhodzai - Christiansen went on to argue that prostitution and infidelity in the context of HIV/AIDS have created a difficult question for the Zimbabwean feminist movement: how to be loyal to all women? All three texts pose a critique of the marriage institution, both in terms of the generational conflicts involved in the definition of 'a respectable marriage' and the moralism implied in having to stay with a husband who has infected you with HIV/AIDS. Christiansen argued that the texts portrayed an ambivalent pride about being a respectable woman. On the one hand, there is regret over not having protected oneself and on the other hand there is pride over having been a faithful wife. The question often put to women who engaged in 'small

house activities' was 'where is your self-respect?', and the answer given in most cases was 'for economic reasons'. 'Respectable middle class women', such as the writers mentioned earlier, are expected not to fall into temptation but it is understandable if poor women engage in infidelity and prostitution. But understanding the plight of poor women who see no other way out than to 'sell themselves' does not alleviate the danger this poses to 'respectable women' who do not have a means of freeing themselves from a bad marriage and the subsequent danger of HIV infection. This dilemma poses difficult questions for the 'women, gender and HIV/AIDS circuit'. Christiansen argued that the question pending in the Zimbabwean feminist movement was the following: 'What should feminism be in the context of HIV/AIDS?'

The discussion after the second session focused on Muchemwa's concept of 'blood and bones' and its relation to religion as well as nationalism. The discussion furthermore focused on the representation of men and women on HIV/AIDS prevention posters, which had been shown in Christiansen's presentation, and the relation between class and 'small houses', and the extent to which 'cultural nationalism' could be considered as a new phenomenon.

### **Session 3: 'Subverting'**

The third session discussed the way in which journalists, opposition leaders and authors such as Dambudzo Marechera contributed towards deconstructing or subverting official versions of the nation. **Bill Saidi** discussed the history of intolerance that has characterised both pre- and post-independent Zimbabwe. For Saidi, colonialism was the epitome of intolerance. He gave a few examples to illustrate this. For instance, Saidi narrated how he once worked as an assistant for a white employer who ran a car company in Salisbury. When a white woman entered the premises, she asked his employer: 'What is that monkey doing in there?'. His employer defended Saidi and said that he was an excellent worker. This demonstrated to Saidi that there are good and bad people everywhere and taught him to never look down upon someone on the basis of colour or class. While the colonial period was characterised by bigotry, Saidi saw the same form of intolerance emerging in the post-independent period through his work as a journalist. Newspapers are still being banned and Zimbabwe does not have a free press. Even though 40,000 people sacrificed their lives during the liberation struggle, Zimbabweans ended up with nothing at independence. Saidi also pointed to the May 2008 xenophobic attacks in South Africa as an example of the continuation of intolerance. His only hope for Zimbabwe lies in tolerance for fellow human beings.

**Robert Muponde** analysed the particular styles of masculinity that Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai symbolised. He argued that Mugabe represented security, control, austerity, while Tsvangirai stood for empathy, softness and protection. In his combat wear and his raised fist, Mugabe brings guns to the table. Tsvangirai, on the other hand, portrays a much softer image with his colourful shirts, open hand wave, chubby body and smiling white teeth. He promises to bring in cash rather than guns through his excellent relations with the international donor community. Whereas Mugabe generally does not show tears at the graveside, Tsvangirai wiped off fat tears during the funeral of killed MDC activist Tonderai Ndira. Mugabe considers Tsvangirai as a servant or tea boy of the West but the opposition does not view Tsvangirai as a puppet but as someone who will provide 'thick tea', who will provide more Cremora to ordinary tea.

Muponde concluded by arguing that Tsvangirai thus represented a more feminine kind of masculinity compared with the austere and military-like masculinity embodied by Mugabe. However, Mugabe's stern image was softened up in ZANU-PF's colourful 2008 election campaign leaflet which resembled a Pentecostal church advert. The photo of a smiling Mugabe in the leaflet to some extent came closer to Tsvangirai's warm and feminine representation.

**Anna-Leena Loivanen** discussed the way in which Dambudzo Marechera has obtained the status of a cult icon. She argued that it was not by accident that Marechera has become an icon but his personality proved receptive or useful to a particular audience that made a cult hero out of him. In the context of decolonisation and nation-building, Marechera's writing was not always appreciated, particularly in the Zimbabwean context. He was seen as an extreme person, a sort of mad man who was disloyal towards 'the people'. His writing was considered too elitist and complex to read for common people. He was seen as being only committed to writing but not to the nation. Marechera was quickly condemned as the nation's enemy and Zimbabwean publishers were afraid of publishing his so-called 'unpatriotic' texts. He was misunderstood and silenced in Zimbabwe's public sphere. However, soon after his death in 1987, Marechera's image was raised to another level. He became a cult icon for young aspiring writers and his memory is kept alive through commemorations up to this time. He was also seen as a prophetic author who had the courage to adopt a critical stance towards the postcolonial context. Marechera's disillusionment with postcolonial Zimbabwe is now considered to be prophetic and he is seen by some as a genius who saw more than ordinary people. In some way, he anticipated what was to come in the 2000s. Toivanen concluded by arguing that Marechera's writing has not only shed light on the postcolonial situation in Zimbabwe but he also had much to offer to postcolonial studies. His image as misunderstood prophet could be understood properly within a postcolonial theoretical framework and therefore Marechera was soon to be celebrated as the ultimate postcolonial writer.

In his paper, **Drew Shaw** explored Marechera's contribution towards cultural deconstructions of Zimbabwe. He emphasised that Marechera's legacy still looms large, demonstrated for example by the House of Hunger Poetry Slam in Harare's Book Café. In the Poetry Slam, a new generation of young Zimbabwean poets revives Marechera's legacy and express themselves freely, including about the political situation in the country. Marechera's writing is timeless in many ways. He wrote about issues that are resounding today. While gender activists have questioned Marechera's misogynist attitude towards women, he can at the same time be seen as someone who was highly critical of patriarchal pressures on women. In this regard, he was ahead of his time. Marechera also criticised nationalism at an early stage and ridiculed, subverted official versions of the nation. According to Shaw, Marechera provides some pointers towards multiple imaginations of the nation. He championed unfettered freedom of expression and opposed discrete racial identities. In his book *Black Sunlight*, he wrote about love across the colour bar and hereby profoundly challenged ethnocentric forms of nationalism.

In the discussion after the final session, participants wondered whether Marechera could really be understood as a dissident, questioned Saidi for speaking too kindly about white Rhodesians, and debated the extent to which postcolonial theory has appropriated

Marechera. During the evening programme of the workshop, Dobrota Pucherova and Eric Nzaramba presented their plans for 'Dambudzo Marechera: A Celebration', a multi-media festival to celebrate the avant-garde work of Dambudzo Marechera, to be staged in Oxford in May 2009. Multi-talented artist Victor Mavedzenge closed the workshop with an excellent sample of his regular comedy performance at the Book Café in Harare.