

Sylvester Dombo

Senior Lecturer,
Department of History,
Great Zimbabwe University,
Email: sylvesterdombo@gmail.com

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ZIMBABWE'S "CAPTURING A FADING NATIONAL MEMORY PROJECT": AN EVALUATION AND RECONSIDERATION

Abstract

In 2004, the government of Zimbabwe launched the Capturing a Fading National Memory project whose aim was to collect and preserve memories of the 1896/7 uprisings and the liberation struggle of the 1970s. This project was spearheaded by the National Archives of Zimbabwe in collaboration with the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe, and the History Department at the University of Zimbabwe. This article is about the politics of memory and the memorialisation of the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe. It argues that the history of the liberation became important in the post 2000 period in Zimbabwe characterised by economic collapse and political crisis. It feeds into the broader debate on the politics over the control of the past and how that past was deployed in the present to validate the elite's claim to power while at the same time excluding those that were deemed to be sell-outs.

Key Words: *Liberation, heritage, capturing a fading national memory, sell-outs, oral history*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the year 2000, there have been attempts by the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government to deploy history for its own political interests. This resulted in a deliberate attempt by the government to reconstruct a history that portrayed the ruling ZANU-PF party in good light, dominated by patriots, who had the interests of the country at heart, while depicting others as sell-outs who were bent on reversing the

gains of the liberation struggle. This history, which is dominated by memories of the liberation struggle was meant to teach the people the ZANU-PF a way of thinking in the face of its waning support due to the rise of the opposition party the Movement of Democratic Change (MDC). Resultantly, ZANU-PF began to manipulate history for the service of the party, culminating in the birth of the so-called patriotic history, moving away from the old nationalist history which basically was history in the service of the nation.

By reviewing an oral history project sponsored by the government, this article examines the processes that engendered the emergence of a new brand of history which Ranger termed “patriotic history” and how this history has been deployed to ensure the political survival of ZANU-PF party whilst at the same time discrediting the opposition. The article also briefly examines the various episodes in Zimbabwe history where patriotic history manifested itself. These include ZANU PF’s stranglehold on the national television, radio and newspapers and how it has used these media to present one narrative of the past for its benefit. The closure of the media to the opposition meant that there could be no alternative narrative of both the past and the present. In addition, the ZANU-PF government introduced the National Youth Service, where the youths were mainly taught ZANU-PF propaganda. Every year, different groups of youths are taken to Chimoiio and Zambia to see the mass graves of innocent civilians massacred by the Smith regime during the struggle for independence. The article is, however, mainly concerned with how the ZANU PF government set up an oral history project whose aim was to collect oral histories relating to Zimbabwe’s liberation struggle. Dubbed Capturing a Fading National Memory, the project had an ambitious aim of collecting and archiving narratives of the liberation struggle. The article argues that the project was important in gathering information about the struggle and how that particular information was remembered in a country whose leadership was battling for political survival and relevance. Resultantly, the project came across as an instrument by the ruling elites to create a sanitised version of the past which glorified the rulers at the expense of others. It became a tool used to justify the ZANU-PF government’s continued stay in power.

This study is located within the discourses of contested pasts and contested memories and it draws largely from the work of Richard Werbner’s work on how different groups in Zimbabwe memorialised their past. Werbner discusses the memorialisation of the elite former guerrillas through their burial at the National Heroes’ acre.¹ His major argument is that personal and collective memory has become increasingly contested and problematic in post-colonial nation building.²

1 R Werbner, “Smoke from the Barrel of a Gun: Postwar of the Dead, Memory and inscription in Zimbabwe”. In: R. Werbner (ed.), *Memory and the Postcolony: African anthropology and the critique of power* (London: Zed Books, 1998).

2 Werbner, “Smoke from the Barrel of a Gun”.

It is contested because the elites have their own version of the past they would want to force down the throats of the people ostensibly to aid in the building of a nation. This leads to what Werbner terms as anti-memory whereby the past is imagined as buried and forgotten.³ The concept of contested pasts enables engagement with critical questions over what the past means in the present, be it the pre-colonial, colonial, nationalist or postcolonial past. In the context of Zimbabwe, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that postcolonial state building and nation-building processes were predicated on memories of African resistance and the national liberation struggle.⁴ He contends that,

In Zimbabwe a lot of effort has been spent on turning the memory of political violence into prestige and legitimacy for itself and tribute for others. Since 1980, Zimbabwe has been agonising under a nationalist regime whose political essence was founded on the history and memory of the national liberation struggle. This regime has been holding the nation hostage to skewed and highly partisan and sanitised version of history and memory of national liberation struggle, presenting it in romantic and heroic terms pruned of internal and external contestations.⁵

Thus, this article is an attempt to investigate how the ZANU-PF government has appropriated singular and sanitised narrative of the liberation struggle in its nation building. The article also draws from Alexander *et al's* impressive work on violence and memory in Matabeleland, which argues that the proclamation and enactment of official memory of the liberation war has sought to silence all alternative memories. In this work, they argue that in Matabeleland, it remains difficult and dangerous for people to seek to erect monuments to those slain in the 1970s and those who died at the hands of the state in the 1980s. ⁶ Ivan Murambiwa, the Director of the National Archives of Zimbabwe aptly summarises the state of the Zimbabwean memories on the conflict by arguing that Zimbabwe is divided in fragmented and fluid sections of victors and losers, victims and victimisers.⁷ He further notes that due to the diversity of its shared memory, some sections actively seek to protect their desired memories through collecting documents, objects and stories that buttress their viewpoints while at the same time seeking to erase unwanted memories of losses, atrocities and repression.⁸

3 Werbner, "Smoke from Barrel of the Gun".

4 SJ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Do "Zimbabweans" Exist? Trajectories of Nationalism, National Identity Formation and Crisis in a Postcolonial State* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 22.

5 Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Do "Zimbabweans" Exist?*

6 J Alexander *et al*, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the "Dark Forests" of Matabeleland* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000).

7 I Murambiwa, "The Zimbabwe Archive", Paper Presented at the "Expatriate Archives and Museums" Workshop, British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Bristol, 19 April 2008, p. 2.

8 Murambiwa "The Zimbabwe Archive", p. 2.

This article, therefore, looks at the political uses of this project and examines how it was received by different sections of the Zimbabwean community. By drawing from my personal experience as one of the research assistants and from the experiences of other researchers who participated in the Capturing a Fading National Memory project, together with those of other team leaders, this article seeks to review the programme, examine how the government sought to use it to obtain a collective national memory of the past, whilst suppressing the unpleasant segments of the past. Although reference will be made to some of the oral interviews collected during the project, emphasis will be on the organisation of the project, the motivation behind it, the key players and the general political environment obtaining in the country during the period. Put together, all these factors can help us understand the centrality of memory in the government's attempt to reconstruct history of the liberation struggle.

National projects to retrieve memory of the liberation struggle have been underway in southern Africa. In post-colonial Namibia, research by Becker questions how people in that country, in particular, those who lived through the war as civilians in Owambo, negotiate identifications through liberation war memories, and how these are related to the narratives evoked in nationalist public memory.⁹ This study shows that the master narrative of national liberation which has become the foundation fairy tale of post-colonial Namibia, legitimates and authorises the power of the post-colonial elite as the solitary, gallant liberators from apartheid and colonialism. However, the discourse that, "SWAPO brought freedom through the barrel of the gun", has not remained unchallenged.¹⁰ What Namibia obtained during the first two decades of independence is not unique to that country alone. It has been observed that state-led commemorations of nationalist achievements and struggle histories have been highly selective, liable to elevate ruling party histories and heroes over others, often ignoring unions, youth or women, and dealing with violence selectively or not at all.¹¹

In addition, rather than promoting national unity as envisioned, state heritage projects have often provoked debate and confrontation, particularly when combined with mounting popular hostility, shifts towards authoritarianism and closure of the public sphere, the pressures of economic decline and gaping inequalities enhanced by neo-liberal adjustment.¹² Such contexts have shaped controversy in Zimbabwe over ZANU-PF's definition of national heroes, silence over the Matabeleland massacres and more recent "patriotic history", and

9 H Becker, "Commemorating Heroes in Windhoek and Eenhana: Memory, Culture and Nationalism in Namibia, 1990-2010", *Africa* 81 (4), 2011, p. 519.

10 Becker, "Commemorating Heroes in Windhoek and Eenhana".

11 Becker, "Commemorating Heroes in Windhoek and Eenhana".

12 J McGregor and L Schumacher, "Heritage in Southern Africa: Imagining and Marketing Public Culture and History", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32 (4), 2006, p. 27.

comparable tensions in Namibia over SWAPO's glorification of its own role while failing to acknowledge political exiles or those slaughtered in the camps before independence.¹³

2. BACKGROUND: ZIMBABWEAN HISTORIOGRAPHY SINCE 2000

Earlier works on nationalism ranging from the pioneering works of Ranger¹⁴, David Martin and Phyllis Johnson¹⁵, and David Lan¹⁶ and work by Bhebe¹⁷ were celebratory and heroic narratives of nationalism and the armed struggle¹⁸. However, the crisis of governance together with the economic meltdown that gripped the country at the beginning of this millennium marked the beginning of the deconstruction of nationalism. However, it was Norma Kriger who had started the break from celebrating the liberation war as her book *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War*, which focused on guerrilla violence and coercion on the peasants.¹⁹ Breaking away from the heroic accounts of the war were the norm then, this work focused on the use of terror by the guerrillas. Ranger, argues that her work was held to be heretical and shocking because it replaced solidarity by coercion.²⁰ In the same vein, Ranger also engaged the darker pasts of the liberation struggle and the violence associated with it in *Violence and Memory* as well as in the introduction to *The Historical Dimensions of Democracy and Human Rights in Zimbabwe: Volume Two in 2003*.²¹

The proliferation of works which challenged the dominant liberation war narrative as well as the emergence of a strong opposition party in the form of the MDC prompted the ZANU PF government into initiating an oral history project

13 McGregor & Schumacher, "Heritage in Southern Africa".

14 T Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia: A study in African Resistance, 1896-7* (London: Macmillan, 1967); T Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerilla War in Zimbabwe* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985).

15 D Martin and P Johnson, *The struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1981).

16 D Lan, *Guns and Rain: Guerillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985).

17 N Bhebe, *The ZAPU and ZANU Guerilla Warfare and the Evangelical Church in Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1999); N Bhebe, *Simon Vengayi Muzenda and the struggle for Independence of Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 2004).

18 Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Do "Zimbabweans" Exist*, p. 15.

19 NJ Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerilla War; Peasant Voices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

20 TO Ranger, Book Review: "Zimbabwe's Guerilla War: Peasant Voices", *African Affairs* 93 (370), 1994, p. 142.

21 TO Ranger (eds.), *The Historical Dimension of Human Rights and Democracy in Zimbabwe, Volume 2: Nationalism, Democracy and Human Rights* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 2004).

whose aim was the collection of oral narratives on the liberation struggle across the country. Ranger associated this project with the government's attempt to produce a narrow history which would be at the service of politicians.²² He claims that he became aware of the full force of "Patriotic history" when he returned to Zimbabwe toward the presidential election of February 2002.²³ In a personal report on that election he wrote:

I want to begin discussing the elections by talking about history. You will say that this is because I am a historian. But I don't think anyone could fail to notice how central to ZANU-PF's campaign was a particular version of history. I spent four days watching Zimbabwe television which presented nothing but one "historical" programme after another"; the government press, *The Herald* and *Chronicle* ran innumerable historical articles ... Television and newspapers insisted on an increasingly simple and monolithic history ... Television constantly repeated documentaries about the guerrilla war and about colonial brutalities ... *The Herald* and the *Sunday Mail* regularly carried articles on slavery, the partition, colonial exploitation and the liberation struggle. I recognised the outlines of many of my own books but boiled down in the service of ZANU-PF.²⁴

Ranger's views are eloquently captured in his paper entitled "Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The struggle over the past in Zimbabwe" which was published in the *Journal of South African History* in 2004. In the paper, Ranger argued that "patriotic history" was very different from the older "nationalist historiography" and even more different from the more recent "historiography of nationalism."²⁵ "Nationalist historiography" proclaimed the nationalist movement as inclusive and even non-racial. By contrast, "patriotic history" emphasises the division of the nation not only into races but also into "patriots" and "sell-outs" among its African population.²⁶ It proclaims the need for an authoritarian government in order to repress and punish the "traitors," who are often depicted as very numerous; for example, most of the urban population and large sections within the rural.²⁷ It offers, instead, a highly selective and streamlined version of the anti-colonial struggle. Kriger also demonstrate that "patriotic history" grew out of patriotic memories, which in turn were engendered by the ruling party's declaration

22 TO Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The struggle over the past in Zimbabwe", *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30 (2), 2004.

23 TO Ranger, "Uses and Abuses of History in Zimbabwe", In: M. Palmberg & R. Primosa (eds.), *Skinning the Skunk: Facing Zimbabwean Futures* (Uppsalla: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2005).

24 Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography".

25 Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography".

26 Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography".

27 Ranger, "Nationalist Historiography".

that certain individuals and groups had made more significant contributions to independence than others.²⁸ It has no time for questions or alternatives. It is a doctrine of violence because it sees itself as a doctrine of revolution and ZANU-PF as the revolutionary party meant to rule forever.²⁹ It has been observed that ZANU-PF continuously present itself as the ordained guardian of Zimbabwe's political past, present and future.³⁰ Likewise, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that the monologic account of the past buttresses the ZANU-PF claim to be the alpha and omega of rulers of Zimbabwe.³¹ The appropriations and re-appropriations of the same political discourse over time and in quite different political contexts must be understood as part of a paradigm of nationalism in which political actors seek to legitimate their quest for power and resource and to de-legitimate the rights of others.³² The political discourse of the nationalist struggle, Kriger argues, has always been used to produce insiders and outsiders.³³ In such a scenario, history became a tool to delegitimise opposition political parties and even undermine the contributions by others. Tendi argues that ZANU-PF uses history to isolate and deter the emergence of opposition politics by dividing Zimbabweans into "patriots" and "sell-outs".³⁴ Such a view has gained traction among scholars like Jesmael Mataga, arguing that the state's commemoration and memorialisation of the liberation struggle that presents a sanitised narrative in order to inculcate political and social cohesion, has led to the suppression of alternative histories and failed to acknowledge or highlight the role of other bodies that were involved in the liberation war, such as opposition political parties.³⁵

The desire to silence the opposition can also be seen in light of the resuscitation of nationalism by ZANU-PF. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Wendy Willems, a crucial element of the resuscitation of nationalism in Zimbabwe in the early 2000s was the intensification of government-sponsored cultural activities which, under the pretext of celebrating "the all-inclusive nation", sought to gather support for ZANU-PF's agenda and discredit the MDC.³⁶

28 N Kriger, "From Patriotic Memories to "Patriotic History" in Zimbabwe, 1990 – 2005", *Third World Quarterly* 27 (6), 2006, p. 1153.

29 Kriger, "From Patriotic Memories".

30 BM Tendi, *Making history in Mugabe's Zimbabwe: Politics, Intellectuals, and the Media* (Bern: International Academic Publishers, 2010), p. 4.

31 Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Do "Zimbabweans" Exist*, p. 3.

32 Kriger, "From Patriotic Memories to "Patriotic History", p. 1153.

33 Kriger "From Patriotic Memories to "Patriotic History", p. 1153.

34 Tendi, *Making history in Mugabe's Zimbabwe*, p. 4.

35 J Mataga, *Practices of Pastness, Postwars of the dead, and the power of heritage: Museums, Monuments and Sites in colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe, 1890-2010* (PhD, University of Cape Town, 2014) p.199.

36 S Ndlovu-Gatsheni and W Willems, "Making sense of cultural nationalism and the politics of commemoration under the Third Chimurenga in Zimbabwe", *Journal of southern African studies* 35 (4), 2009, pp. 945-965.

In Zimbabwe, this performance took the form of a range of bashes, galas and commemorations as well as a dramatisation of ZANU-PF's legitimacy as founded on the liberation struggle through well-selected television documentaries, a revival of *Chimurenga* music and carefully crafted political speeches.³⁷ The Capturing project can also be located within this broad idea of resuscitating nationalism through the memorialisation of the past.

Opposition political parties, especially the MDC, were seen as parties without the credibility to rule the country that had been "liberated by blood" as they would simply invite the colonialists back into the country to give them back the land where blacks had been resettled. ZANU-PF wants to be seen as the party that is perpetuating the legacy of the heroes of the First *Chimurenga*, glorifying anti-colonial heroes, like Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi. These iconic figures are viewed as though they belonged to ZANU-PF. As a result, the MDC was always subjected to ridicule and mockery towards the elections. While Mugabe drew deeply upon the revolutionary past, the MDC, he said, had abolished history, proclaiming its irrelevance in an "age of globalisation". He saw the MDC as a party that merely promises prosperity and is prepared to "reverse" Zimbabwe's history in order to achieve it. Thus, the MDC is seen as a puppet desirous to "turn Zimbabwe into a British and American overseas territory".³⁸ Therefore, the history to be produced had to assure the Zimbabwean public that the MDC had no right to claim the Zimbabwean presidency as they had not participated in the war of liberation. The election, therefore, pitted history against "the end of history".³⁹ Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the MDC was regularly mocked, not only for having failed to take part in the guerrilla war but also for having failed to comprehend history.

According to ZANU-PF and Mugabe, there was the need to re-write the history of the country to correctly reflect where the country was coming from and where it was going.⁴⁰ Although the crisis in Zimbabwe was political and economic, it also increasingly became an ideological one. One of the ways through which the government sought to rewrite the history of the country was through the Capturing a Fading National Memory project which was launched on 15 May 2004 in Tsholotsho district. Jonathan Moyo, the Minister of Information

37 Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, "Making sense of cultural nationalism".

38 Ranger, "Uses and Abuses of History in Zimbabwe", p. 9.

39 Ranger, "Uses and Abuses of History in Zimbabwe", p. 9.

40 See, R G Mugabe, *Inside the Third Chimurenga: Our Land Our Prosperity* (Harare: Government of Zimbabwe, 2001). This is a handbook with a collection of Mugabe's speeches delivered at funerals of fallen heroes, campaign messages at rallies and other public fora. This handbook has now become a key text in teaching National Youth Service. See also, Kriger's work on Patriotic memories where on p. 1155 she cites a motion in Parliament on the debates as to who really was a hero and the mover of the motion, though ZANU-PF believed that history was being distorted and as such should be re-written.

and later Member of Parliament for ZANU-PF in that constituency who was the guest of honour at the launch said, "information history can be a power game", though admittedly he went on to stress that this project aimed to get at the experience of the many rather than that of "powerful elites".⁴¹ The meeting was attended by chiefs, by the director of the National Archives, Ivan Murambiwa, and the Director of the National Gallery in Bulawayo, Addelis Sibutha. The University of Zimbabwe was "expected to play a critical role of quality controller, verifying information and providing students for research".⁴² This was part of a broader attempt to challenge the rising works that sought to deconstruct nationalism in Zimbabwe. It is to this project that I turn to, first looking at its objectives, the people involved and their expertise *vis-à-vis* the claim that the project is an appendage of "patriotic history".

3. CAPTURING A FADING MEMORY: BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

In this section I attempt to look at the reasons behind the launch of this oral history project. This will be done by firstly looking at the objectives of the project, a look into the institutions involved and generally on how the project evolved in the different provinces around the country. The project emanated from the idea that national history, especially memories of the liberation wars was fading fast into extinction as the people who had either witnessed or participated in them (First *Chimurenga* of 1896-97 and the Second *Chimurenga* of the late 1960s to 1980) were dying. As a result, the Ministry of Home Affairs through its two Departments responsible for safeguarding the country's history and heritage, the National Museum and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ) and the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) in collaboration with the University of Zimbabwe's History Department signed a Memorandum of Understanding to undertake a project to collect oral information on and about the wars of liberation in Zimbabwe. It was envisaged that the project would enable people who lived through these two epochs of the country's struggles to shed light on what transpired in their areas. Therefore, the project was expected to start at provincial level until the whole country was covered. This was informed by the lack of both resources and manpower to cover the whole country simultaneously. However, the project only covered four districts, namely Tsholotsho, Chiredzi, Gutu and Gwanda, with the latter failing to record a single interview owing to problems that will be discussed later. The project is still on-going but is being administered by NAZ alone as other partners have since pulled out. According to Dunmore Maboreke, who was part

41 Ranger, "Uses and Abuses of History in Zimbabwe", p.11.

42 Capturing a Fading National Memory, 2003.

of the research team that did fieldwork in Gutu, the NAZ desperately needed to get historical information about the basic history of the country and have that information archived for the benefit of researchers and the general populace.⁴³

The NAZ is mandated to carry out research, process and preserve the country's history. According to the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) Act of 1986, the mandate of the NAZ is "to provide for the storage and preservation of protected historical records".⁴⁴ Besides having the records centre and the research section, the NAZ also has the oral history section which collects and preserves both oral traditions and oral history. The NMMZ Act Chapter 25:11 mandates the institution to provide the conservation of ancient, historical and natural monuments, relics and other objects of historical or scientific value or interest. The NMMZ has an ethnography department, which collects and researches ethno-histories of various groups in the country. The NMMZ has been given the mandate to set up the Liberation War Museum, set up interactive centres at Provincial Heroes Acres and identification and rehabilitation of graves of combatants who died during the Second *Chimurenga* in neighbouring countries. This has inevitably resulted in the need for systematic data collection, including oral history of the Second *Chimurenga*. However, these two departments are constrained by lack of resources such as manpower, finance, equipment and other facilities. This has affected the mandate of these institutions, especially NAZ which up to this day has major backlogs in processing records that are supposed to be in the public records. Ironically, most records that are still to be processed relate to the period of the Second *Chimurenga*. Because of these and other problems, the University of Zimbabwe's history department was brought into the project for strategic reasons. Though it didn't have the funds, it had the "skilled manpower" to conduct systematic interviews. Besides, the history department has for a long time benefitted from the archives for researches for both students and staff. The three institutions were, therefore, seen as the perfect team to collect the oral history of the country. The government of Zimbabwe would come in as the sponsor as these institutions were heavily under-funded, ironically by the same government.

There were compelling reasons for embarking on this project. One of the reasons why the project was deemed important is that on the eve of independence, a lot of important documents on the history of the country were destroyed by the colonial government. Frederikse quoted one Rhodesian soldier saying,

Whew! A lot of stuff went up in smoke in this country in the early 1980. Salisbury was surrounded by a little cloud of black smoke from all the

43 Interview: Author with D Maboreke, Deputy Director of the National Archives of Zimbabwe, 8 December 2010.

44 National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) Act of 1986.

army camps, government offices, police stations. And shredding too. The Special Branch shredders were working overtime. You have never seen so much paper in some of those police post carton files, all being carted off to the incinerators and shredders. When the city incinerators were all full, they sent us off to the crematorium for more burning. If one asked what was destroyed the answer was very clear, the past. Records of interrogations, army set-ups and strategies, profiles of people, personal records. TV films and radio tapes too.⁴⁵

Another example of the destruction of material from the archive can be seen in the case of Ranger, who wrote *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* using the archives. Most of the documents which Ranger had accessed disappeared soon after the publication of the book. The colonial regime was embarrassed because the documents they had created were being used to write the history of resistance.⁴⁶ With the disappearance of these primary archival documents, the only way to reconstruct the history of the *Chimurenga* was then to rely on oral history and oral traditions.

Further justification of the project was the seeming deficiencies of the surviving colonial records which reflected an alien and conquest mentality which was seen to be misleading and inadequate for the independent nation's history. There was a need to get primary information straight from the ordinary people, unadulterated by secondary and elitist influences such as books by authors who could have been biased in one way or the other. The Director of NAZ and chairman of the project noted that the joint project, "Capturing a Fading National Memory" is borne out of the realisation that the history of the iniquities and injustices that led to the two *Chimurengas* could, if forgotten return to haunt the nation.⁴⁷ The majority of the recorded accounts on the two struggles, especially on the Second *Chimurenga*, are from the Rhodesian government regime and this project seeks to provide a balance to recorded collective national memory. Oral history captures voices of ordinary people. Murambiwa argued that, the Zimbabwe War Oral Archive is located in the memories of Zimbabweans that hosted, participated in, collaborated, or supported the Second *Chimurenga* but these memories were not recorded and some got lost as the holders either died or lost their recollections with the passage of time.⁴⁸ However, the attempt to balance or present a counter-narrative to that presented by the colonial archives remained to haunt the project as the information obtained tended to be biased towards one party that participated in the programme. It has also to be remembered that

45 J Frederikse, *None but Ourselves: Masses vs. Media in the making of Zimbabwe* (London: Heinemann, 1982).

46 Public Lecture by TO Ranger, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 22 November 2010.

47 Speech made by Ivan Murambiwa, Director of National Archives of Zimbabwe, Gutu, 19 January 2006.

48 Murambiwa "The Zimbabwe Archive", p.2.

the project was carried out at a period when the political environment was so polarised that one party to the liberation struggle tended to be portrayed in good light at the expense of the other parties. This obviously had a bearing on the need to collect a balanced collective national memory that the project sought to do.

The project used a district-based approach where informants were identified and approached through their local leadership, mainly traditional chiefs. The project sought to cover the following groups: War Veterans 30%, Collaborators 20%, Ex-detainees and restrictees 20%, former Rhodesian Soldiers 5%, Peasants 20% and Sell-outs, auxiliary forces, spirit mediums and others 5%.⁴⁹ However, it has to be noted from the onset that the interviews captured were not representative of the above categories. The reasons for that include the polarisation of the political environment, which meant that former Rhodesian Soldiers, auxiliary forces and the Sell-outs did not come out to be interviewed. Resultantly, the history that was captured was that of the victors.

4. CAPTURING A FADING MEMORY: AN APPENDAGE OF PATRIOTIC HISTORY?

Having looked at the background of the project, the key players and its objectives, this section now turns to evaluating the results of the project. In this section, I problematise the way the informants were assembled and the quality of the collected oral histories. All these issues will be discussed in light of Ranger's claim that the Capturing a Fading National Memory project was a key component of the patriotic history historiography, which for the purposes of this paper I define as history in the service of the party (ZANU PF).

First of all, it has to be realised that the majority of the informants were gathered through the ZANU-PF structures, from the provincial level to the grassroots. When the Project Manager, Retired Lt. Col. Niya Mthombeni, who was part of the team that carried out fieldwork research in Gutu, was asked why the researchers had to do it within ZANU-PF structures, he replied that "*ZANU PF ndiyo muridzi wenhorondo yechimurenga saka itai zvanoda*" (ZANU-PF are the owners of the struggle and as such we have to follow their leading).⁵⁰ In Chiredzi, the researchers followed the traditional leadership structures to obtain informants, and this generated less conflicts *vis-à-vis* the Tsholotsho and

49 These were tentative figures given to the research assistants to have in mind whilst they were identifying potential informants. As can be seen, there was an attempt to balance the informants to cater for all the groups that participated in the war, either on the side of the guerrillas or the government forces.

50 Everyday after going out for interviews, there was a feedback session where the research assistants would present the tapes they had used and get new ones. Crucially, the session also allowed the researchers to report on the problems they would have encountered during the day.

Gutu interviews whereby political structures were made use of. Ironically, it is the Gutu project which is generally regarded as the most successful as more than 50 interviews were recorded as per required target, compared to the Gwanda project where not a single interview was recorded.⁵¹ The scholars who went to Gwanda blame the links with ZANU-PF for the failure of the project.

Unlike in some cases in Gutu district where the use of ZANU-PF structures yielded positive results, the same could not happen in Gwanda because of the people's hatred of ZANU-PF. ZAPU and ZANU have been enemies since the war of liberation as the two parties fought differently which culminated in them contesting separately and against each other at elections on independence. Their conflicts worsened in the 1980s when ZANU-PF accused ZAPU of harbouring rebels to destabilise Zimbabwe. This led to a Civil War where a lot of civilians were murdered before ZAPU was swallowed into the Unity government of 1987. To the common people, the Unity Accord was only an agreement between and among leaders whilst the ordinary people continued to be marginalised.⁵² Therefore, ZAPU cadres were not forthcoming during the programme as they felt that they were not part of ZANU-PF's history of the liberation. According to Miss Y, it is usually the elites who determine what is known and what is not.⁵³ She said in apparent reference to the fact that ZANU-PF had for a long time denied the re-telling of the liberation struggle especially by the people from Matabeleland. It was not a surprise to learn that Dumiso Dabengwa refused to sanction interviews with the project team. From the onset, it can be seen that the project was going to be politically biased in such a way that it would exclude people who were not ZANU-PF. This use of "local leadership structures" (a euphemism for ZANU PF branches) to access informants was particularly problematic. As cited by Joseph Mujere *et al*, Ivan Murambiwa, co-director of the project and NAZ Director later noted that this compromised the research's integrity.⁵⁴ The informants often told "the story that they think you want to hear as a government agent", and "in other settings [they] would offer different versions". Such a telling admission from someone leading the project lends credence to accusations that, Capturing a Fading National Memory. National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe was simply part of ZANU PF's historiographical agenda.⁵⁵

51 S Ndlovu, An evaluation of the role of the National Archives of Zimbabwe in collecting Oral Combat History of the Zimbabwe Liberation War (1962-1980) since 1980 (BA, University of Zimbabwe, 2007), p. 34.

52 The Unity Accord was signed between ZANU PF and PF-ZAPU to end the conflict in the Midlands and Matabeleland where about 20 000 civilians were murdered by the Fifth Brigade.

53 Interview: Author with Miss Y, A research assistant who went to Gwanda at NAZ, Harare, 8 December 2010.

54 J Mujere *et al*, "Those who are not known, should be known by the country": Patriotic history and the politics of recognition in southern Zimbabwe", *Journal of East African Studies* 11 (1), 2017, p. 97.

55 Mujere *et al*, "Those who are not known, should be known by the country", p. 97.

The project faced numerous problems, especially in the Matabeleland provinces for reasons that will be discussed in order to show that the project was never national and the memories collected were not representative of the nation's memory. As highlighted earlier, the identification of informants was mainly done through ZANU-PF structures and in Matabeleland provinces, especially in Gwanda this strategy failed to work in 2006. Firstly, it should be appreciated that the Matabeleland provinces are home to the Ndebele speakers who were at the receiving end of Mugabe's violence in the early 1980s where about 20 000 civilians were killed by state security during the disturbances there.⁵⁶ Before the Unity Accord of 1987, ZANU-PF saw members of ZAPU as enemies who were supposed to be destroyed even though they had participated in the war of liberation as equals with them. This is despite the fact that ZAPU had specialised army units in most of the country including the Midlands and Mugabe's home area of Mashonaland West which shares the border with Zambia where ZPRA operated from. So in Matabeleland, most people refused to give interviews for the project because they said they wanted to be cleared first by the ZAPU leaders who ironically were part of the Mugabe government at independence. Furthermore, to show that the project was not in any way popular in this region, people were granting access to be interviewed by an organisation called Mafela Trust, whose patron then was the late Dumiso Dabengwa, former Home Affairs Minister who defected from ZANU-PF to revive ZAPU.⁵⁷ Another informant who participated in the project in Gwanda noted that since interviews were carried out at ZANU-PF offices, it meant that those who did not subscribe to ZANU-PF did not participate as they felt the project was party sponsored.⁵⁸ In what many saw as unprecedented, most informants in Gwanda said they would gladly talk about the liberation if they were interviewed first on the Gukurahundi massacre which until this day the ZANU-PF government is still to apologise to the people.

The closest Mugabe came to apologising was one statement he made during a funeral address at the National Heroes Acre on the 4th of July 1999 at the burial of former Vice President Joshua Nkomo when he simply said, the Gukurahundi was "a moment of madness". He strongly believes that researching on it would simply open "old wounds" among the people.⁵⁹ However, it has been noted that some people have nightmares about the same liberation struggle they were desperate to document and there was a general consensus that some people are hurting up to this day. Therefore, to the people in this region, Capturing a Fading National

56 Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJP), *Breaking the silence: Building true peace* (Harare: CCJP & Legal Resources Foundation, 1992).

57 Ndlovu, *An evaluation of the role of the National Archives of Zimbabwe*, p.55.

58 Interview: Author with Mr X, University of Zimbabwe, 15 January 2011. Mr X was a research assistant with the team that went to Gwanda.

59 M Dzirutwe, "Mugabe's legacy: Thousands killed in "rain that washes away the chaff", *Reuters*, accessed 13 November 2019.

Memory was not in any way national but another attempt by ZANU-PF to elbow others out of history by trying to propagate the memory of the victors instead of everyone. Indeed, Ranger *et al* argue that it remains difficult and dangerous for people to seek to erect monuments to those slain in the 1970s, let alone those who died at the hands of the state in the 1980s.⁶⁰ In summarising the failure of the Project in Matabeleland, Murambiwa noted that whilst in Tsholotsho many informants came, their testimony was very shallow. In Gwanda, despite the use of political structures, very few informants were willing to come forward.⁶¹

In light of the above assertion, one would quickly realise that other participants in the war were deliberately ignored. For example, besides ZAPU, there are other parties that fought in the war like the late Bishop Abel Muzorewa's African National Councils United and the late Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole's ZANU (Ndonga). Since these parties joined the ill-fated Internal Settlement of 1979 which gave birth to Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, they were deemed to have sold out the struggle and as such their contribution to the struggle was wiped away. The Internal Settlement was an agreement signed on the 3rd of March 1978 between Ian Smith and some nationalists leaders who were included in leading positions in government. This arrangement was not recognised by both ZANU and ZAPU and these leaders were seen as having sold out the liberation struggle. As a result, if they were to be interviewed, they were to be treated as sell-outs. But the term sell-out has always been a contested one as shown by Marowa in his study on the construction of the "sell-out" identity during Zimbabwe's war of liberation when he focused on the Dandawa community in Hurungwe.⁶² The term is not stable in its use depending on who is using it and where they want it applied.⁶³ Likewise, Tendi argues that the meaning of "sell-out" evolves over time depending on the nature of rivals.⁶⁴ The definition of a sell-out is like a chameleon that changes colour in relation to the surrounding environment. During the liberation struggle, Marowa argues, sell-outs existed at three different levels and occurred from different angles. The levels from which sell-outs existed concerned rendering support either to the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), the Zimbabwe People's revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) or to the Rhodesian Front (R.F.) or its auxiliary forces, the Pfumo reVanhu (P.R.V.).⁶⁵ The Hurungwe analysis could also be applied throughout Zimbabwe as each member of the above mentioned parties use the word to label those from the opposition. However, as ZANU-PF

60 Alexander *et al*, *Violence and Memory*.

61 Murambiwa, "The Zimbabwe Archive".

62 I Marowa, "Construction of the "Sell-out" Identity during Zimbabwe's war of liberation: A case study of the Dandawa Community of Hurungwe District, c1975-1980", *Identity, Culture and Politics: An Afro-Asian Dialogue* 10 (1), 2009, p. 14.

63 Marowa, "Construction of the "Sell-out"", p.12.

64 Tendi, *Making history in Mugabe's Zimbabwe*, p.6.

65 Marowa, "Construction of the "Sell-out"", p.4.

sought to portray themselves as the genuine political party they label all political parties as sell-outs even up to the present moment when they talk of the MDC by claiming that they did not fight for the liberation of the country. This is despite the fact that the MDC was only formed in 1999 and most of its members were former card-carrying members of ZANU-PF. ZANU-PF, therefore, wanted to use the sell-out phenomenon to show that it continued from the colonial period to the present and as such people had to rally behind ZANU-PF as the only party that stood steadfastly on the principle of liberation. One headman interviewed by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation remarked that,

we do not need to keep on remembering how the former fighters killed those people they called sell-outs. In fact we had forgotten about it, but because these days they have started this violence and killing of people who belong to the opposition parties, we are reminded again. ... The [present day] issue of people being killed because of their belonging to other parties opens old wounds.⁶⁶

There was an incident in Gutu which almost culminated in violence. One research assistant had an appointment with an informant who claimed that he had worked for the Red Cross during the war and that he had first-hand encounters with the actual fighting in the area. The man claimed that he had tangible evidence in the form of papers and correspondence of what happened during the war, the battles and often bloody encounters that required the Red Cross to help. When the interview was about to start at his shop, many ZANU-PF youths started gathering outside wanting to stop the interview and threatening violence. Finally, the team leaders cancelled the interview and it later emerged that the man was a candidate for the MDC in the coming council elections. Like what Marowa observed in Dandawa, many of the so-called sell-outs were killed by ZANU-PF in spite of the fact that they did not have enough evidence to label them such. Just like in Dandawa, people in Gutu were also killed for being sell-outs and even for being accused of practicing witchcraft.

Still in Gutu, an interview by Joseph Mujere at a place called Kamungoma where about 105 people were killed clearly showed that the guerrillas were at fault. According to Mujere *et al.* guerrilla culpability at Kamungoma was hardly discussed, and other important historical details too were ignored, for example, the Kamungoma massacre took place on (and got its name from) a farm owned by descendants of nineteenth-century Basotho migrants who had arrived with Dutch Reformed Church missionaries; and that one of those killed was Basotho,

66 Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, "Memorialisation and Reconciliation in Transitional Southern African Societies" (Report of the Southern African Reconciliation Project, July 2005), p. 8.

which was scarcely acknowledged. Yet, they claim to have been blameless during the war.⁶⁷ They always claimed that, because of sell-outs they were physically beaten by Smith's forces. But in this particular battle, the comrades were told that the government soldiers were approaching the area but because they had gathered a lot of people for the *pungwe*, they decided to continue with the meeting. In this case, instead of coming to rescue the people, the guerrillas put the lives of 105 people on the line. When the interviews were done, people expressed bitterness about this incident and claimed that they deserve government help since the incident left many maimed and crippled. After this massacre, which was obviously caused by the guerrillas, Patricia Mapfumo noted that, the guerrillas came back looking for sell-outs and one woman was badly beaten for being "*mukadzi wemupuruvheyi*" (wife of a sell-out).⁶⁸ Therefore, instead of dwelling on the war of liberation, the informants focus on what they believe to be neglect by the government yet they also fought for the country. As a result, one cannot rule out embellishments and over-dramatisation of the past in order to get financial help, especially at a time when the government had just given the ex-combatants huge pay-outs for their role in liberating the country as well as for injuries sustained during the war. In another example, a research assistant was asked to first give the ZANU-PF slogan as a precondition to being interviewed. When the young researchers failed, they were chased away.

The other challenge that faced the programme was the fact that most, if not all research assistants were young adults from the university who are normally referred to as the youth. In Zimbabwe, there is a common belief by politicians and ZANU-PF people that the universities and colleges had become "anti-government mentality factories" and that parents and teachers had generally failed to pass on the inspiration of the liberation struggle. Instead of appreciating that these youths were capturing such information for posterity, most informants, especially the war veterans, quickly dismissed them as supporters of the MDC and as such they would not give them the information. The common catch phrase used to deny one an interview was that "*muri vanhu veMDC*" (you are the MDC people). In extreme cases, most of the war veterans would take over the interview, intimidating the young researchers so much that the interview wasn't worth recording or preserving.⁶⁹

5. CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to highlight the dangers of embarking on an oral history program in a country where the political leaders largely draw their authority from

67 Interview: J Mujere with P Mugariwa, Kamungoma Battle site.

68 Interview: J Mujere with P Mugariwa, Kamungoma Battle site.

69 Most such accusations would come out during the feedback sessions

the past. The paper also showed how the project failed to deliver the expectations of the elite as evidenced by its failure to obtain information especially in the Matabeleland provinces where the people felt that the project was a ZANU PF project. According to Murambiwa, the attempts to collect and house in the National Archives the “War Oral Archive” has not been successful and as a result this archive continues to be lost to the twin forces of death and forgetfulness with each passing day. As a result, many abstained from participating claiming that other aspects of their past had been deliberately suppressed by the government. In areas where the project was not a disaster, it was still difficult to separate it from a government project, bent on prescribing the nation what to remember and what not to remember.

This article also has touched on the methodological aspect of the Project, though a few interviews carried out during the project were used here and there to illustrate some arguments. It is, therefore, assumed that a more empirical paper drawing from the actual recordings can be produced as a follow-up to this paper. This is so because, this paper focused primarily on the objectives of the project in the context of the siege-mentality exhibited by the government as it feared the opposition. In the words of Tendi, ZANU-PF resorted to using the history to both deter the emergence of alternative opposition parties or to discredit them as mere puppets of the Western powers. In this case, the project was supposed to show that ZANU-PF was the owners of the country’s history. This goes hand-in hand with the ways in which the same party was involved in providing the “right” informants for providing interviews. It has been noted that most if not all interviews were organised by party structures in the districts which basically excluded potential informants who did not subscribe to ZANU-PF thinking. It has also to be borne in mind that the two participants in the project, namely NAZ and NMMZ are government departments that operate under the Ministry of Home Affairs and as such they would be expected to be partisan as they were already compromised. The argument is that in a heavily polarised environment like Zimbabwe since 2000, it is impossible to obtain objective accounts of any history especially when the government is involved. All these challenges have to be appreciated when researchers begin to appropriate this primary data.

Finally, a word or two has to be said about the personnel used to carry out these interviews and how this has a bearing on the out-put of the project. The first two projects carried out in Gwanda and Chiredzi were done by research assistants who had just finished their Ordinary level or their Advanced levels. The Director of the Archives noted that information gathered during these two field trips were shallow. It may be either due to the fact that the informants were either masquerading as participants in the war or that the informants were not adequately equipped to carry-out a research of such magnitude.

This is in contrast to the field trips to Gutu and Gwanda and the subsequent ones. The research assistants here were University students majoring in History and it is assumed that they knew in detail the history of the country and could therefore ask appropriate questions. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Gutu fieldwork was deemed successful while the Gwanda project flopped owing to the political history of the region.