

# From Pioneer Historiography to Patriotic History: Constructing Usable Pasts in Zimbabwe (1890–2018)

Teresa Nogueira Pinto 

**Abstract:** Different political projects and ideological positions are founded upon distinct accounts of the past, each with their own emphases, silences, and omissions. The case of Zimbabwe illustrates this connection between power and history. Whereas the myths of colonial historiography provided legitimization frameworks for settler colonialism, “patriotic history” became a key element of the legitimization strategy implemented by the post-independence regime. Pinto analyses how history and historiography were incorporated into narratives of power legitimization in both pre- and post-independence Zimbabwe and how, in the late 90s, history and historiography became critical sites of political polarization and contestation.

**Résumé :** Différents projets politiques et positions idéologiques sont fondés sur des récits distincts du passé, chacun avec ses propres accents, silences et omissions. Le cas du Zimbabwe illustre ce lien entre le pouvoir et l’histoire. Alors que les mythes de l’historiographie coloniale fournissaient des cadres de légitimation au colonialisme de peuplement, « l’histoire patriotique » est devenue un élément clé de la stratégie de légitimation mise en œuvre par le régime post-indépendance. Pinto analyse comment l’histoire et l’historiographie ont été incorporées dans les récits de légitimation du

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**Teresa Nogueira Pinto** is assistant professor of Political Science at the Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias in Lisbon. She earned her PhD in Globalization Studies from the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Nova University of Lisbon. Her research work has focused on the processes of power legitimization adopted by personalized, semi-authoritarian, and resilient regimes in sub-Saharan Africa, through a comparison between the cases of Zimbabwe (1980–2017) and Rwanda (1994–2017). Her research interests include authoritarianization dynamics, extra-electoral dynamics of power legitimization, and the role of history and historiography in the construction of narratives of power justification and power contestation. E-mail: [teresanp@campus.fcsh.unl.pt](mailto:teresanp@campus.fcsh.unl.pt)

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pouvoir dans le Zimbabwe avant et après l'indépendance et comment, à la fin des années 90, l'histoire et l'historiographie sont devenues des sites critiques de polarisation et de contestation politiques.

**Resumo :** Diferentes projetos políticos e posições ideológicas radicam em visões distintas do passado, cada uma com as suas homenagens, silêncios e omissões. O caso do Zimbabué ilustra esta relação entre poder e história. Se a historiografia pioneira se orientou para legitimar o colonialismo demográfico, a história patriótica fez parte da estratégia de legitimação do poder do regime pós-independência. Este trabalho de investigação analisa como a história e a historiografia foram apropriadas pelas narrativas de legitimação do poder, no período pré e pós-independência. Esta continuidade permite compreender como, nos anos 90, a história e a historiografia se tornaram lugares de polarização e contestação política.

**Keywords:** Zimbabwe; pioneer historiography; settler colonialism; patriotic history; power legitimization

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## Introduction

The relationship between history and power is a two-way street: if the past shapes the political present, the political present also shapes the ways the past is perceived. In authoritarian settings, historiography may become a powerful tool for fabricating political consent, which is why authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes often attempt to establish a monopoly over history and public memory (Beetham 1991; Clark 2010; Caronan 2015; Von Soest & Grauvogel 2015). This attempt is presented as an imperative, a civilizing mission necessary to educate the masses according to a certain model of citizenship. As Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Valentim Mudimbe (1993) point out, public history has been used to shape the collective memory in some African countries, with the state presenting itself not only as the primary agent of history, but also as its main promulgator and interpreter.

In Zimbabwe, the myths fabricated by colonialist historiography were replaced by “patriotic history” (Ranger 2004). But patriotic histories are not exclusive to Zimbabwe. Based on their prominent role in liberation struggles and state building processes, leaders and liberation movements, once they have become dominant parties, construct a discourse of political legitimation based upon a selective narrative about the nation. In many cases, including the case of Zimbabwe, the construction of patriotic histories has accompanied processes of power personalization, as leaders managed to tie the subjectivity of the nation onto their personal charisma, thus making any attack against their rule an attack on the nation itself (Eze 2010:158).

In the case of Zimbabwe, while glorifying sovereignty, patriotic history systematically denounced the liberal and Western approach to human rights,

which was depicted as a form of moral imperialism (Tendi 2008). Not surprisingly, patriotic history and its imperative of defending the nation against all enemies, either real or perceived, became a straitjacket for the opposition, restricting the terms of political debate in the public sphere. At the present moment, amid a process of democratic recession (Diamond 2015) accompanied by rising manifestations of nationalism and attacks on the excesses of globalization, and where the past remains a highly contentious place, it is pertinent to analyze the case of Zimbabwe and the uses of patriotic history.

This article is divided into four sections. Section one explores how the myths disseminated and crystallized by pioneer historiography were used to legitimize settler colonialism and reinforce white nationalism, and briefly analyzes the emergence of black nationalism and the path to independence. Section two explores the political meaning of patriotic history and how it was disseminated by the ZANU-PF regime and put at the service of power legitimation, consolidating the dynamics of power personalization. Section three demonstrates how, despite the authoritarian nature of the ZANU-PF regime, history and historiography have remained sites of political polarization in post-independence Zimbabwe. The last section sums up the main findings.

### **“Pioneer” Historiography and Its Colonizing Myths**

Just as the legacy of colonialism, as a system of domination, has dramatically impacted the exercise and justification of power in post-independence Zimbabwe, so did the legacy of colonial historiographies shape the course of post-independence historiography. It is not possible to understand the role of patriotic history in the strategies of power legitimation designed by the ZANU-PF regime under the leadership of Robert Mugabe without first considering the legacy of pioneer historiography. In its attempt to legitimize settler colonialism, this historiography transformed land and race into the main criteria defining power relations. Such distinction was crystallized in legal and administrative mechanisms and distinctive forms of socialization.

In Rhodesia, European settlers occupied the land and, through that land, established their descent. Settler colonialism, through blood and soil, created a new and specific political identity, expressed in the idea of a white motherland in African lands (Pimenta 2008). In 1888, Cecil Rhodes negotiated exclusive mining rights in Mashonaland and Matabeleland from Lobengula, the second and last king of the Ndebele. Lobengula also signed the Moffat Treaty, in which he committed to not give away parts of his territories without previous consent from Britain. After the British government recognized the validity of the Rudd concession, the Queen granted majestic powers and legal personality to the British South Africa Company (BSAC). This decision was based on the recognition that the existence of a “powerful British Company (...) would be advantageous to the interests of subjects in the United Kingdom and in its colonies.”<sup>1</sup> While the BSAC laid the

foundations for the annexation of the territories into the British Empire, the Moffat Treaty and the Rudd concessions did not include the transfer of land property rights.

In 1890, the pioneer column advanced through the region and, on July 11, occupied Mashonaland. In 1893, the first native reserves were created in the districts of Gwaai and Shangani, in a gesture described by the settlers as “magnanimous” (Mlambo 2010:50). Between 1893 and 1894, the BSAC forces fought against the Ndebele in Matabeleland. What the pioneers lacked in numbers they made up for in firepower as provided by the Maxim machine guns, and it was this that determined their victory (Keppel-Jones 1960). In 1895, the occupied territories were consolidated and named Rhodesia, after Cecil Rhodes. The two following years were marked by drought, plagues, and the Ndebele and Shona anti-pioneer revolts, which were successively crushed by the BSAC forces (Fisher 2010). These revolts became known among Africans as the “First Chimurenga” (*Zvimurenga*). In 1891, the Southern Rhodesia Order in Council came into effect; the territory was divided into districts and sub-districts, and law replaced the Maxim machine gun as the main force governing the African populations (Keppel-Jones 1983). The occupation of land was thus legally validated.

Pioneer historiography, through the creation of heroes and foundational myths, played an important role in the reinforcement of a collective identity among the settler community, an identity which was simultaneously white and African. In 1956, the inaugural edition of the *Rhodesia Africana Society Review* opened with a 1954 speech by Rhodesia’s Governor Robert Tredgold. Tredgold was the great-grandson of Robert Moffat, founder of the first mission in Matabeleland and grandson of John Smith Moffat, one of the men who had negotiated with Lobengula. His speech on the inauguration of the Mangwe Pass Memorial represents the attempt to re-create a usable past, evoking the distinctive romanticism of a colonial moment that may be described as being one of “settlers without colonialism” (Veracini 2013:2). In his speech, Tredgold evokes the advance of the pioneers through what were described as “empty spaces” and recalls how, a century before, the “shuffle of naked feet and the thud of hooves gave place to the rumble of wagons,” announcing the arrival of the white man and the beginning of a new era (Tredgold 1956:1). Pioneers were presented as the founders of a new era and a new order, and their bravery was exulted, in a reconstitution of past events that was both Eurocentric and romanticized. They advanced through what they saw as “virgin lands” (Ballinger 1966:16), and as a reward for their “adventurous spirit” were given property in the new land: 3,000 acres to each pioneer (Mlambo 2010:52).

This myth of virgin lands was supported by British geographers who, by the early nineteenth century, described Africa as a continent of vast and empty spaces (Kennedy 2013). But while there were large areas of unoccupied land, this did not mean that it was *terra nullius*: although many areas were inhabited, others had clear boundaries and had been worked through systems of shifting cultivation (Palmer 1970). One decisive factor supporting

this idea of blank spaces, which was used to legitimize colonial domination, was the difference between the way settlers and Africans regarded land use and tenure. According to the settlers, British law took precedence over native customary law. This differential treatment was based on the fact that pioneers, explorers, and historians described Africans as “savages,” thus allowing for the construction of a narrative which presented colonization as a “civilizing mission.” Cecil Rhodes himself once stated that the book *Savage Africa* by the British explorer and historian William Winwood Reade, first published in 1864, had “made him who he was” (Eze 2010:8).

Geographic misperceptions, legal differentials, and the idea of colonization as a civilizing imperative made it possible to dismiss the presence of the “native” (Veracini 2007). Such dismissal became evident in 1918, with the British Privy Council ruling *In re Southern Rhodesia* on the legal status of the lands in Mashonaland and Matabeleland. The ruling, which upheld Britain’s expropriation of the territory of Southern Rhodesia, was based on the claim that the usages and conceptions of rights and duties of Africans were not compatible with the institutions and legal ideas of civilized society.

Between 1901 and 1911, the white population in Southern Rhodesia more than doubled, from 11,000 to 23,000. This increase led to the emergence of a white bourgeoisie with links to agriculture and trade (Arrighi 1967). The London market for Rhodesian mining shares collapsed in 1903, evidencing the structural challenges and low profitability of Rhodesian enterprises; in 1910, while the ten biggest mines in Johannesburg generated profits estimated up to 7 million pounds sterling, profits from the ten biggest mines in Rhodesia did not exceed 614 pounds (Arrighi 1967). Moreover, settlers were under pressure to refund the investors while dealing with the deficit caused by the military expeditions, as the salary of a cavalry soldier in the pioneer corps was three times what would have been the salary of a foot soldier in the British Army in 1940. In order to address the decrease of profits, the minimization of costs — especially labor costs — became a priority (Phimister 1976).

At the same time, the colonial administration focused on agriculture. The permanent and stable nature of the agricultural economy determined the transformation of what was previously a frontier society into a settler colony (Fisher 2010), and a new identity, simultaneously white and Rhodesian, took root. In 1923, Southern Rhodesia became a self-governing colony. This shift strengthened the emergent Euro-African nationalism, which reflected the double nature of settler colonialism: on the one hand, the desire for emancipation from London and the British Empire and on the other hand, the desire to dominate the Africans. Between 1923 and 1960, white domination was reinforced by the adoption of the two-pyramid policy designed to prevent competition between white settlers and Africans (Arrighi 1967). This policy was crystallized by legal instruments, such as the 1930 Land Apportionment Act, which allocated 51 per cent of the land to white settlers, and 29.8 per cent to almost a million Africans (Palmer 1970; Mlambo 2010:55) or the Industrial Reconciliation Act of 1934, which excluded African

workers from the definition “employee,” thus placing them under the regulations of the Master and Servants Act of 1901.

This succession of events is crucial to understanding the political meanings of land and race in post-independence Zimbabwe. Because the elimination of Africans was not an option in Rhodesia, where settlers never accounted for more than 5 percent of the population (Hughes 2010; Brownell 2011), the policy adopted was one of eviction (through displacement and confinement) and exploitation (Veracini 2007). However, Southern Rhodesia’s political ambitions were compromised by demographics, black nationalism, and Britain’s decolonization impulse — the “winds of change” announced by Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in 1960. London would no longer support the political dominion of white minorities as it had exchanged the Empire for the Commonwealth, an arrangement more in line with the emerging world order, and was unwilling to sacrifice its strategy for the sake of white dominium in Southern Rhodesia (Myers 2000; L’Ange 2005). Settlers were also losing on the demographic front: whereas between 1945 and 1960 the white population had increased from 80,500 to 219,000, the black population was growing much faster. According to the 1962 demographic censuses, the black population had increased by 20 per cent, and was seventeen times larger than the white population (Brownell 2011:23).

In November 1965, Ian Smith made the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), citing the need for a gradual transition and the safeguard of the position and rights of the white minority. In his speech, Smith committed to a progressive political inclusion of the black population, by bringing them into government and administration “on a basis acceptable to them” and granting them opportunities to “advance” and “prosper.” But his speech also reinforced white nationalism amid the Cold War context. Though a “small country,” Rhodesian people had a “role of worldwide significance,” which was to preserve justice, civilization, and Christianity, and Rhodesians would not “sell their birthright.”

The international context and the expansion and consolidation of black nationalism challenged the survival of the white regime. While resistance was as old as colonialism itself, it became more organized and mobilized with the consolidation of two different political movements: the Zimbabwe National African Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) led by Joshua Nkomo. Both movements were oriented toward political independence and regaining control over land (Moyo 2004). Joshua Nkomo was the founder and leader of the Southern Rhodesian African National Congress (ANC), created in September 1957. In 1960, the National Democratic Party (NDP) was created to replace the banned ANC, and in 1961, after the NDP was outlawed, Nkomo founded the ZAPU. In 1963, the treasurer of the ZAPU, Ndabaningi Sithole, broke away from Nkomo’s movement and created the ZANU with the support of Robert Mugabe who, at the congress held in Chimoi in 1977, would be formally elected leader of the party. While strategic and tactical disagreements played their part, the split was determined by ethnic differences which became political tensions between the

Ndebele and the Shona leaderships. This moment is important because it demonstrates that, since its inception, the ZANU, as a political project, was also ethnic-centered (Mangiza & Mazambani 2021).

Whereas ethnicity remained an important cleavage, the liberation struggle intensified during the 1960s in what became known among the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) as the Second Chimurenga. The guerrilla movements would probably have won the war in a scenario of continuing confrontation (Herbst 1990). However, independence was the result of a military standoff and of political and military negotiations, rather than an outright victory on the battlefield. The negotiated nature of the independence process, where Britain would play a determinant role, would have enduring political consequences, paving the way for patriotic history as a tool for power legitimization.

### Patriotic History

The foundation of the new Zimbabwe was a negotiated process in which the guerrilla movements had to make important concessions (Mandaza 1986; Dorman 2016). Black and white nationalists were to share the same territory, but not necessarily the same concept of national belonging.

Patriotic history, as defined by Terence Ranger (2004), is based on a selective, ideological, and exclusivist narrative of the country's past, which was used as a strategy to legitimize the perpetuation of power. However, whereas the prevailing of a divisive concept of belonging over a non-racialized and inclusive concept of citizenship became evident in the 2000s (Raftopoulos 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009), the demonization of political opponents, labeled as "dissidents" and depicted as a nullification of the liberation struggle itself, was already part of Robert Mugabe's rhetoric, even before independence. By this time, however, the political enemy was the PF-ZAPU, and ethnicity, more than race, distinguished "friend" from "foe." Dissidents, according to Robert Mugabe, encouraged "tribalism" at a time when the country needed to remain united. As Mugabe stated in a speech in 1977, "... [the actions of] destructive forces [who] strive in any direction to militate against the party line or [...] seek, like the rebels of 1974 and 1975/76, to bring about change in the leadership or structure of the party... are a negation of the struggle" (Sadomba 2011:52).

In the 1980s, the violence that characterized the Gukurahundi massacres, the silencing of the victims, and the versions presented by those who lived through these events led some historians to question the regime's dominant narrative (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Alexander et al. 2000). The purge against PF-ZAPU was based not only on physical violence, but also on the diffusion of a partisan narrative which celebrated the ZANU, its symbols, heroes, and deeds, as the only liberating force of Zimbabwe, while demeaning the ZAPU and Nkomo, who were pictured as "oppressors" (Kriger 2005; Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Willems 2009:950). Violence was accompanied by attempts to structurally change the political system as defined by the



1980 Constitution. After independence, prominent members of the ZANU defended the idea of a one-party state. This idea was based on two arguments: first, that Joshua Nkomo, the PF-ZAPU, and its armed wing ZIPRA represented a threat to permanent peace, and second, that the ZANU-PF should construct a single-party participatory democracy, in line with African tradition and oriented toward the creation of a classless and unified society (Mugabe 1989). In its exclusivist nature, the official narrative built around the Gukurahundi massacres was, to a certain extent, a prelude to patriotic history.

In the early 2000s, faced with the emergence of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and with the slow but apparently progressive erosion of its popular support, as reflected in the results of the 2000 constitutional referendum, the regime was forced to formulate new narratives of power justification. It was in this context that patriotic history became a primordial legitimizing strategy for the ZANU-PF (Ranger 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Tendi 2010). While based on a specific account of the past, patriotic history was also about re-imagining the future through a radical “redistributive project” (Mujere et al. 2017:96).

Patriotic history continuously proclaimed and promulgated the revolutionary tradition that characterized the liberation struggle period, particularly among the younger generations, whose parents and teachers had, according to the official narrative, betrayed or forgotten the Chimurenga values. This narrative was widely propagated in the state-controlled media, teaching institutions, and ZANU communications (Ranger 2003), reflecting a hegemonic control over the collective social memory (Bhebe 2015). Patriotic history was based on three main claims: first, that Zimbabwe’s liberation was a product of the Chimurenga; second, that the ZANU-PF and Robert Mugabe were the sole legitimate representatives of the Chimurenga spirit; and third, that the liberation process was not yet completed.

The origin of the term Chimurenga is to be found in the Ndebele-Shona risings, led by Lobengula’s son Nyamanda against the BSAC Administration. It refers to Murenga, a spirit medium which was involved in the resistance movements and is said to have helped African warriors acquire an immunity to the bullets of the white men (Ranger 1967; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013). Historians such as Julian Cobbing (1976) and David Beach (1980, 1986), however, challenge the narrative of a pre-planned, cohesive, and proto-nationalist rising. According to Ian Phimister (2012:2), Terence Ranger — while overall being critical of Zimbabwe’s nationalism and as the creator of the concept of “patriotic history” — contributed to reinforcing this type of nationalism through his works such as *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia: A Study in African Resistance* (1967), which exercised a “pernicious nationalist influence, providing usable pasts” for Zimbabwe’s nationalist authoritarianism.

The establishment of a line of continuity between the first uprisings, the liberation struggle, and the post-referendum period allowed the ZANU-PF to evoke a continuous war, while monopolizing public expressions of nationalist, anti-colonial, and decolonial aspirations.



Through the formulation of patriotic history, the political goals of liberation and emancipation were incorporated into a strategy of power perpetuation. By presenting the ZANU as the only liberating force in the country, patriotic history projected the idea that unconditional political loyalty to the ruling party was both a necessary and a sufficient condition for the emancipation of the black majority. In this context, the hegemonic party and patriotic history became the only legitimate political and ideological positions from which liberation and emancipation could be completed. Those who contested this historical narrative were deemed unpatriotic (Barnes et al. 2016) and, consequently, enemies of the liberation project itself.

### *How Patriotic History Legitimized Authoritarianism*

Henning Melber (2002, 2009) claims that regimes in Southern Africa became stuck in a paradox of liberation without democracy. Liberation was seen as a process which was both just and necessary: the end of history, in Francis Fukuyama's sense (Melber 2002; Phimister 2012). In the case of Zimbabwe, the political and historical legacy of liberation was transformed into a political argument for the perpetuation of power: because liberators had been the winners of a just struggle against colonialism and imperialism, any opposition to them was perceived as reactionary and illegitimate.

The emergence of patriotic history occurred within a framework in which nationalism had become racialized under the hegemonic discourse, which adopted the claims and principles of Afro-radicalism and nativism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). While racial cleavages were instrumentalized by the regime, it was not possible to dissociate black nationalism and emancipation claims from the "settler-native" question. This was a question which, as Mahmood Mamdani (2001, 2012) points out, remained both historical and political, since the categories of "native" and "settler" were the product of power relations and could not exist in isolation from each other. However, the ZANU-PF revived and reconstructed fundamental cleavages, and those who did not endorse the principles of patriotic history and its political consequences were defined as traitors and double-crossers (Chiumbu 2004) and excluded from a black identity that was forged and celebrated by the regime.

History became an instrument of power justification and perpetuation through three fundamental dynamics. The first was the glorification of liberation credentials, based on a selective historical account that focused on the emancipatory role of the ZANU-PF. Participation in the liberation war and loyalty to the regime became the most relevant criteria for accessing power. In a speech delivered in Masvingo a week before the 2008 harmonized elections, President Mugabe claimed that liberation, and specifically the liberation process unleashed by the ZANU-PF, was the *raison d'être* of political power. The MDC, he alleged, represented the reversal of that liberation project.

When we held our first congress in Gweru in the 1960s we resolved to send our comrades [...] to fight the whites who had taken our land, and we will send them back again should Tsvangirai win the elections. We will not allow a party that would take land back to the whites if it comes to power. Whose land should go back to the imperialists again? We say no to that. They must know that tiri vechibhakera (we are of the fist) and we will punch anyone who crosses our path. (*The Standard*, March 30, 2008)

During the Third Chimurenga, the hegemonic discourse presented land redistribution as a sufficient condition for liberation and emancipation of the Zimbabwean people, thus ignoring that Zimbabweans had “varying conceptions” of what constituted a good life (Tendi 2008:387).

Second, patriotic history also contributed to the perpetuation of power by formulating narratives that justified repression and normalized violence, which was given a “redemptive function” (Mbembe 2002:251) and was used by the regime to manufacture consent and neutralize dissent. Because liberation was not yet completed, according to the party narrative, the bullet was to remain the guardian of the ballot. In this context, patriotic history reinforced a sense of impunity among the political and military elite. When their political hegemony was threatened, veterans, the ZANU-PF, and Robert Mugabe played the “total war” card. Addressing the ZANU-PF congress in December 2001, Mugabe called party militants to act as “soldiers” and warned them that the upcoming elections were “total war,” in effect the third Chimurenga uprising (Kagoro 2002:6).

Finally, patriotic history also provided a discursive framework for the de-legitimation of any opposition. Under the logics of post-2000 nationalism, those who contested patriotic history, the Third Chimurenga, and the ZANU-PF liberation credentials were trojan horses of neo-imperialism. Any opposition to the regime was treated as opposition to the liberation project itself, through the establishment of a direct association between the political opposition, the interests of the white minority, and neo-imperialism. The MDC was portrayed as representative of a community which was not “indigenous to Africa.” While the MDC was the near enemy, it was constantly equated with the far enemy. In December 2000, President Mugabe urged the ZANU-PF to continue to “strike fear in the heart of the white man,” reminding party members that Africa was for Africans and Zimbabwe was for Zimbabweans.<sup>2</sup>

It is not possible to understand the structure of opportunities (or the lack thereof) of the opposition in Zimbabwe in the 2000s without considering patriotic history, and the exclusivist nature of the nationalism in which it was anchored. The hegemonic discourse reinforced the regime’s claim to being the sole legitimate voice in Zimbabwe’s political and public space (Dorman 2016; Raftopoulos & Compagnon 2003). This narrative justified the suppression and repression of the opposition, which was defined as counter-revolutionary and reactionary, representing a threat to the very sovereignty of the people of Zimbabwe. To the extent that it was funded and controlled by

Western powers, the opposition represented an existential threat to the nation itself:

The MDC should never be judged or characterized by its black trade union face, by its youthful student face, by its salaried black suburban junior professionals, never by its rough and violent high-density lumpen elements. It is much deeper than these human superficialities, for it is immovably and implacably moored in the colonial yesteryear and embraces, wittingly or unwittingly, the repulsive ideology of return to white settler rule. [...]. It is a counter-revolutionary Trojan horse contrived and nurtured by the very inimical forces that enslaved and oppressed our people yesterday. (Mugabe 2001:88)

In this context, the elaboration of an alternative discourse became an extremely challenging exercise. However, despite its revolutionary claims, the aim of patriotic history was not to transform power, but rather to perpetuate it in its authoritarian and exclusivist forms. As Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015:1) has argued, Mugabe's political impulses were more anti-colonial than decolonial and more reactive than proactive.

By establishing a line of continuity between past and present, patriotic history relied on exclusivist concepts of citizenship and belonging, which were determined according to racial and political criteria. Nativism which, as Achille Mbembe (2002) points out, establishes a confluence between the spatial, racial, and civil bodies, was reflected in the idea that as aliens (*amabhunu*) or traitors, both white Zimbabweans and the opposition were excluded from the political community, which was composed of the patriot sons and daughters of the soil. Criteria of belonging were racialized, creating a division between insiders and outsiders (Ncube 2010; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Charumbira 2015; Ncube 2018). Moreover, despite the initiatives of memorialization and monumentalization at the community and regional levels, the resistance to colonial rule and the sacrifices of common Zimbabweans, women, or ethnic minorities during the liberation war, as well as their different—and sometimes divergent—experiences were not accommodated in the grand, national narratives of patriotic history (Bull-Christiansen 2004; Bhebe 2015).

Patriotic history was used to distinguish friend from foe at both the domestic and international levels. Internally, such distinction was drawn through the projection and imposition of a Shona-centered approach to the liberation struggle. *Vis à vis* regional and international audiences, such discourse was adapted to mobilize support and allegiances against neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism. The strength and appeal of this discourse must be viewed in light of the unipolar moment and, more specifically, of the Bush Doctrine and its neo-imperialistic traits. This discourse sustained the attacks against the hegemonic human rights agenda presented and represented by what the regime described as "liberal imperialism," while justifying the repression of civil society organizations in Zimbabwe, which were

described as “puppets of the West” and Trojan horses of neo-colonial interests.

*Disseminating Patriotic History: The Past as the Future*

The inauguration of a political era brings with it a new vision of the future. Such visions often rely on specific visions of the past, with their own symbols and protagonists. Like other former colonies, post-independence Zimbabwe embarked on a process of white de-territorialization (Fisher 2010) and decolonization of the cultural landscape (Mamvura 2019), which included the creation of new monuments and the celebration of new heroes and ephemerides.

Two years after independence, the National Monuments Committee created a Place Names Commission which was charged with erasing the remnants of colonial domination. The heroes of the Pioneer Column and the white “martyrs” of the Matabeleland wars were replaced by the heroes of the First and Second Chimurenga. The country’s name, Rhodesia, was replaced by “Zimbabwe” in remembrance of Great Zimbabwe, the monument to the ancient Shona Kingdom; Salisbury, the capital named after the British Prime Minister Robert Gascoyne-Cecil, third marquess of Salisbury, was renamed after a Shona chief (Neharawa); Fort Victoria was renamed Masvingo; Vila Salazar, close to the border with Mozambique, was rebaptized Sango; and Jameson Avenue, one of Salisbury’s main streets, was renamed for Samora Machel. Colonial remnants were not, however, totally eradicated. Places such as Beitbridge, Beatrice, and Victoria Falls maintained their English designations. Most schools also kept their previous names, including former white schools which were among the highest ranked in post-independence Zimbabwe, such as Alan Wilson or Prince Edward in Harare.

Toponymy in post-colonial Zimbabwe was about more than symbolic acts of reparation (Swart 2008). It became a political arena in which, through history and memory, the past converged with the present, with places becoming sites of political affirmation and power legitimation through the crystallization of a specific narrative (Mangena 2018). Throughout this transformation of the public space, the ZANU-PF projected its liberation credentials in government-controlled media, national holidays, education curriculums, and monuments (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Willems 2009; Tendi 2010; Barnes et al. 2016). The glorification of the ZANU-PF was inseparable from personality cult. Official rhetoric, processes of place naming and renaming, and official ceremonies between 1982 and 2017 reflected the centrality of President Mugabe, who was pictured as the protagonist of Zimbabwe’s liberation and the “keeper of patriotic memory” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009:72).

Highways, avenues, learning institutions, and the country’s main international airport were (re-)named after President Mugabe, including the 4.48 km Robert Mugabe Road in Harare. According to Circular 8/90 of June 29, 1990, on Place Names issued by the secretary for Local Government, Rural and Urban Development, no living persons could have public features

named after them, except for President Mugabe or other international leaders. Another exception was made in 2014, when a street in Harare was named after First Lady Grace Mugabe. As Michael Eze (2010:164) points out, through this omnipresence, “big men” constantly penetrated every aspect of public and private lives, whereas state projects were presented as personal gifts to the nation, rather than as the fulfilment of public responsibilities.

In the late 90s, it became clear that the political and social consensus generated by the liberation project was collapsing (Raftopoulos & Phimister 2004). Faced with increasing popular contestation and the emergence of a political alternative, the ZANU-PF and Robert Mugabe reacted with Chimurenga nationalism (Willems 2013; Maposa & Wassermann 2014). This was reflected in the intensification of independence celebrations, which acted as “rituals of purification” (Eze 2010:160) where liberation wars were cast as Zimbabwe’s “primary foundation myth” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Willems 2009:945) and “toxic” discourses were delivered (Mpofu 2015:1). From a political perspective, four dates were particularly relevant in post-independence Zimbabwe: Independence Day (April 18), Defence Forces Day (the second Monday in August), National Heroes Day (the day after Defence Forces Day), and Unity Day (December 22). Appropriated by the ZANU-PF, independence celebrations combined cultural elements of the Chimurenga wars with modern urban trends; the *pungwe*, for example, was a music gala which lasted all night and evoked the guerrilla mobilization gatherings during the liberation war (Willems 2013). Official discourses delivered on these days were used to identify and attack the enemies of the national project.

History was also used as an instrument of power legitimation through official education. The youth were to be educated in a “truly Zimbabwean manner” (Solidarity Peace Trust 2003:1) and in the values of “patriotic citizenry” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009:70). Education became an ideological weapon, oriented to shape the consciences of the youth in accordance with the regime’s narrative (Sibanda 2019). In 2001, the Minister of Gender, Youth and Employment, Border Gezi, introduced the National Youth Service, a training program the goal of which was to enhance the skills, patriotic values, and moral education of young Zimbabweans and to fight the effects of the “cultural nuclear bomb of imperialism,” thereby preventing the younger generation from becoming “certified slavers of Western neo-colonialism” (Chiumbu 2004:34; Solidarity Peace Trust 2003). The program was composed of four modules: orientation (patriotism), skills training (including carpentry and agriculture), disaster management, and vigilance (moral education). It served a dual purpose: to reinforce a militarized and patriotic culture (training was provided by War Veterans and members of the Zimbabwe Defense Forces) and to counter dissent among the youth, especially university students. National Youth Training Centres were established throughout the country in the early 2000s, and young Zimbabweans were given training materials which glorified the ZANU-PF and Chimurenga heroes (Solidarity Peace Trust 2003).

In 2002, President Mugabe urged black Zimbabweans to research and write their own history (Chiumbu 2004). Whereas in every other post-colonial society the decolonization of history was a necessary condition for liberation, in Zimbabwe it was also carried out by the regime in order to project a vision of the country's past that was in line with its power perpetuation purposes (Ranger 2009; Moyo 2014). Headmasters and teachers across Zimbabwe were educated by war veterans in patriotic history (Ranger 2003; Tendi 2010).

In 2003, the "National and Strategic Studies" (NASS) were introduced as compulsory for all teacher-trainees. Aiming at producing patriotic Zimbabweans, the NASS presented a double dilemma. First, it exposed the debate about whether education can or must be politically neutral; second, as Munyaradzi Nyakudya (2011) points out, the aim of the NASS was to produce patriotic citizens, and the concept of patriotism can easily be instrumented. While Nyakudya claims that NASS, through the use of interactive teaching methods, managed to transcend the myopia of patriotic history, the implementation of the program cannot be dissociated from a political context in which criticism of the government was seen as unpatriotic and where those who were not patriotic were excluded from the *polis*.

At a time when it was establishing its control over the media through the enactment of legislation such as the Broadcasting Services Act of 2001 and the Access to Information and Protection Act of 2002, the regime also used the media as a privileged platform from which to disseminate Chimurenga nationalism and patriotic history, connecting past and future, history, and power. To revive the Chimurenga *ethos*, state media broadcasted documentaries portraying abuses committed against black Zimbabweans and jingles calling for war, such as *Chave Chimurenga* ("it is now time for war"). The content which was broadcasted projected an approach to history which was centered around Shona ethnicity and the ZANU-PF (Chiumbu 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Willems 2009:950).

The site where the political nature of Zimbabwe's post-colonial toponymy is most evident is in the National Heroes Acre, the final resting place for Zimbabwe's "national heroes" and a "permanent physical symbol of nationhood" (Mpofu 2017:63). The monument, designed by Korean and Zimbabwean artists, celebrates those who sacrificed their lives for liberation. It includes the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the Eternal Flame, which symbolizes Zimbabwe's independence, a museum, and two wall murals. The ZANU-PF politburo determined who should be buried in the National Heroes Acre, and Robert Mugabe was the only living Zimbabwean to have the honor of being represented in the National Shrine, featured in one of the murals picturing the Chimurenga wars. However, as Shepherd Mpofu (2017) points out, national identities are always changing, and so are the narratives and symbols of power legitimation, as well as the ways in which they are contested. The disputes around the final resting place of the two most prominent figures of Zimbabwean politics since the beginning of this century reflect not only how the fight over the past is also a struggle for the concept of

citizenship and belonging, but also the fragility and exclusivist nature of the civic conceptions provided by patriotic history.

Robert Mugabe presented himself as founding leader of the new Zimbabwe and used the Heroes Acre as a site from which to legitimize his power, reward his loyalists, and punish his enemies (Mpofu 2017). But paradoxically, after his death and according to his wish, Mugabe was laid to rest in Kutama, his home village, and not in the National Shrine, thus becoming the site's most prominent absence. In its location at the origin of an ongoing legal and political battle, Mugabe's final resting place exposes the crisis of Zimbabwe's nationalism and the fragilities of the symbols and myths upon which the narrative of patriotic history was built.

When Morgan Tsvangirai passed away in 2018, President Emmerson Mnangagwa did not grant him the status of national hero, and thus he was not eligible to be buried at the National Shrine. The MDC, however, declared Tsvangirai a "people's hero," thus confirming two different conceptions of patriotism and heroic citizenship.

### History and Historiography as Sites of Contestation and Polarization

The past is often a contentious place. In Zimbabwe, despite the hegemonic narrative of patriotic history, historiography and history remained sites of discussion and disagreement, and a lively debate persisted in the academic sphere between divergent historiographic (and political) currents, signalling an active resistance to the regime's attempts at ideological domination.

Resistance in academia came mainly from liberal and internationalist perspectives. However, inspired by the ideas of authors such as Frantz Fanon, intellectuals from the radical left also contested the fundamentals of patriotic history. Almost two decades prior to Zimbabwe's independence, Fanon (1963:159) had voiced a severe critique of the national consciousness which sustained black nationalism and paved the way for the domination of the national middle classes through authoritarian single parties, which he described as "the modern form of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, unmasked, unpainted, unscrupulous and cynical." Following this contention, several authors criticized the ZANU-PF's betrayal of Zimbabwe's liberation potential, accusing the post-colonial regime of failing to implement a socialist revolution (Astrow 1983; Mandaza 1986; Moore 1991). Instead, the negotiated nature of Zimbabwe's independence had turned the country into a "schizophrenic neo-colonial state" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:180), where an indigenous "conservative petty bourgeoisie" anchored in a "populist myth of national homogeneity" took control of the state and acted in concert with the white-settler bourgeoisie against the interests of peasants and workers (Moyo & Yeros 2007:188; Mandaza 1986). Until the 1990s, as Ian Phimister points out, "where scepticism was voiced about the so-called 'national democratic stage' of the revolution during the 1980s [...] it tended to bemoan the entrenchment of capitalism rather than lament the absence of democracy" (2012:4).



However, as the fragile liberation consensus came to an end, other types of critiques emerged which challenged the undemocratic, exclusivist, and divisive nature of patriotic history from a liberal perspective (Hammar et al. 2003; Ranger 2004; Bratton 2014; Tendi 2010) as well as some of its assumptions, including the idea of a perfect black vs. white dichotomy (inherited from the Rhodesian state), or that liberation was essentially a rural phenomenon driven by land claims (Dorman 2016:25–27). Some scholars argued that this liberal approach was a form of “revisionist historiography” which, in the name of democracy and peace, established a compromise with settler colonialism by favoring pluralism to the detriment of black emancipation (Yeros 2002:8; Moyo & Yeros 2013:333). Others, such as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013:182), while being critical of Chimurenga nationalism, emphasized the political effects of “white history” which remained intrinsically imperialistic (and therefore neo-colonialist), based on “myths of decolonization” and “illusions of freedom,” and was part of a global colonial matrix of power whose interests were represented in Zimbabwe’s politics by the MDC.

Tensions between these two different historical approaches and narratives accompanied the constitutional debate which preceded the 2000 referendum and framed the political polarization that characterized Zimbabwe from the late 1990s onward (LeBas 2006; Tendi 2008; Phimister 2012). On the nationalist side, struggle credentials were evoked not only to secure access to power and resources but also as an advantage in the ongoing battle about who was entitled to speak for the nation (Dorman 2016) and define the aspirations of the Zimbabwean people. Brian Raftopoulos and Ian Phimister (2004) point out that the debate about Zimbabwe in the first decade of the twenty-first century gained international significance because it was also a debate about the possibility of moving beyond neoliberal capitalism while avoiding the failure of the international left in finding sustainable democratic alternatives. However, patriotic history emphasized redistribution, while delaying and downplaying democratic reforms, political rights, and liberties which were reduced to external impositions.

## Conclusion

In Zimbabwe it is possible to identify a line of continuity between the colonial and post-colonial periods, given that different regimes resorted to history and historiography as factors of power legitimation. After independence, those in power endorsed a selective version of the past and disseminated it throughout the public space. The adoption of a “usable past” was oriented to the formation of a national conscience and a specific form of patriotism, aligned with the vision and ambitions of the country’s dominant party, which was presented as the sole “liberator” of the country and of its people. Furthermore, the idea of Chimurenga as a permanent war was used to reinforce the divide between “friend” and “enemy,” restrict political and civil rights, and justify violence against the opposition.

Reaction to past injustices and grievances resulted not in a more inclusive order but rather in the reproduction of old dynamics of exclusion. Race remained a fundamental factor within an official narrative which promoted narrow concepts of citizenship and belonging. However, as the regime was going through a period of political and economic crisis, resistance to such legitimisation claims was visible on the historiographical front, where the narratives of patriotic history continued to be contested.

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## Notes

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